
SYSTEM:REBOOT


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System:Reboot

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Notorious space pirate Macro makes a living doing odd jobs and stealing items to sell for a marked up price, but when he steals Download Database - a living computer - he finds himself unwillingly pulled into a conspiracy bigger than his own ego. Pirates can be heroes, right?
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Chapter 1

A/N - This story is not a sequel to my fanfiction Glitched, but it is set in the same universe just… many, many years later. So if you have read Glitched and notice similarities, that is why. Although there are occasional references to events in that story, it is not necessary to have read it. I am making sure to avoid it seeming like you must first read Glitched. I do want this to, in some way, stand alone as it's own story.

Also, I intend this to be long. I've written about 12 chapters so far and this will have weekly updates on Fridays. All being well, you're in for a long, action-packed and hopefully fun, ride! =D

Disclaimer (Applies to entire story from here on out) I do NOT own Pokemon or any of its characters!

Part One - Living Computer

Chapter One

Proxy City stank. Even with the mask filtering the air it stank. Macro resisted the urge to abandon the box he was carrying to tighten the straps over his muzzle further.

The young mawile strutted along the barren streets, clutching the cumbersome metal crate in both paws. Beside him a tall granbull plodded heavily along, carrying his own crate as though it contained nothing but feathers. His purple mohawk poked up between his curved, pink ears, blowing backwards slightly as they walked against the breeze. He couldn't see Anchor's face through the heavy, beak-like brown leather mask, but he could hear his breathing loud and clear through the noisy filter. He wondered briefly if they needed a good clean.

They rounded a corner, narrowly avoiding a stream of muck along the gutter that the sheer sight alone made Macro's stomach turn. A low, dingy building came into view. Despite its height - one floor, two at a push - it was massive. A low, long spread. Likely a former estate for the less fortunate who couldn't afford the luxuries in the more prestigious cities.

Macro finally deposited his crate on the floor, careful not to drop it in the gutter's toxic stream. It would probably burn through the metal and damage the contents - if it could even damage them in the first place. He whisked his foot out of the way as the crate toppled onto its base with a clatter and looked up at the building.

"Careful!" Anchor stopped behind him, his huge shadow making the dingy building look even more unwelcoming. "That stuff leaks they'll be after our necks!"

Macro tutted and pressed a claw to the button on his ear piece. A flash of green shot across his vision and the array of text told him that this was the place. He strode over to the worn and somewhat slimy door and struck the same claw onto the buzzer. Greasy. He stifled a grimace and wiped it off onto his black scarf. A mistake he was soon regretting since he'd only just laundered it that morning.

"Who's there?!" The voice sounded as sticky as the door.

"Wildcard," Macro replied. "We've got the package you ordered."

The door was almost wrenched off its hinges, revealing the lumpy face of a muk. The immense pokemon looked like he couldn't fit through the door, but these creatures could slide through the smallest of gaps. Despite the mask, Macro was certain the stench just got worse. He made a mental note to check their efficiency when he got back on board his ship.

The muk's large eyes bulged out of his head when he saw the crates. "Just two?!"

One slimy arm whisked past the mawile, catching his scarf and leaving a rather unsightly streak of purplish-grey. This time he did grimace, but it was hidden well beneath his mask. Good. The muk would probably have eaten him for breakfast.

Well… supper, at this time.

"It's all we could get," Anchor told the muk. "They keep those places under high security these days. We've got a price on our heads, you know that."

"Don't care." The muk turned his eyes onto the granbull then looked back down at Macro. "I specifically requested three. I'm only paying half."

"Half?!" Macro seethed. "You should pay two thirds at least!"

The muk snorted, sending a purple snot bubble onto the hem of Macro's scarf where it dripped to the floor to join the rest of the grime.

Macro's muzzle crinkled into a frown, but it went unseen. "Two thirds. Call the rest of it a commission fee."

"Fine. Take your two thirds, runt." The muk ignored Macro's leer. He reached inside his body and pulled out a flat, metal card. It expanded out into a holographic display of text that to Macro was backwards. "You space pirates make me sick. Commission fee my left foot."

Macro wanted to explain that the muk had no feet, but he didn't want to be the first pokemon to discover they actually had by receiving one to the face. His scarf was filthy enough. A small beep came from his belt pouch and he switched on his optical display again, checking his credits balance with professional speed. Yup. Two thirds. And an insult. One of the drawbacks of being able to leave little notes with deposits. He pretended he hadn't seen it.

"Pleasure doin' business with ya!" Macro shoved his metal crate forwards. "Two crates of black sludge. Enjoy."

"Aye!" Anchor placed his own crate atop Macro's, blocking out the muk's seething face. "Remember us to your friends."

The muk threw a string of toxic profanity the mask was completely unable to filter out. Macro turned his back on the squat building and carefully hopped over the brown stream. Anchor fell into step beside him and clasped his large pink paws behind his back.

"You know," he said, his voice slightly muffled by his filter, "if you get any more shrill, Cap'n, you might get mistaken for a staraptor."

Macro met the granbull's eyes with a violet leer.

"You sassin' me?!" Macro hissed.

"See, this is exactly my point," Anchor went on. "You need to watch your tone. Use your inside castle voice."

Macro clenched his paws together. Oh, how he wanted to ignore the dog's jibes. He jerked his head towards the sky. "Shut your yap, Anchor, and call my ship."

The granbull chuckled and tapped a complex pattern across the screen of his wrist computer.

Macro folded his arms and resisted the urge to lean against the boarded up shop he'd stopped beside.

"Stupid slime ball called me 'runt'," he said.

"Well… don't take this the wrong way, cap'n," said Anchor. "But you do know you're a little…"

"You say short, I'll crack you one with my horn."

Anchor chuckled and folded his large arms.

"I don't know why Meta City won't just employ these filthy pokemon," said Macro. "It'd solve a lot of problems. I mean, they practically eat pollution."

"Yeh," said Anchor. "They also poop it back out again afterward, and it's even more toxic after passing through their bodies."

Macro shrugged. "So? At least they could dispose of it much more cleanly. Pass it into a sewage system rather than flooding through Proxy's streets."

Anchor gave a non-committal grunt and looked down at his wrist computer. Macro glanced up at the brown sky, noting the familiar hulk of Wildcard Gamma as it slowly moved above them. His eyes wandered back to the boarded up buildings and sludge-filled streets, scanning over the unreadable shop signs and ragged posters that fluttered in the light breeze. One of them sported the face of a mawile with a jagged scar over his muzzle. 'Wanted. Hunter. Ten Thousand Credits.'

"I wonder what this city used to be like?" he said. "Before it became this."

"Probably like the ones in System Sky," said Anchor. "Pubs, bakeries, clubs, factories. All that jazz."

Flash after flash of pink shot down behind Anchor in a familiar ladder of neon lights and he leapt up, grabbing onto one of the higher rungs. It immediately began to shoot back up into the sky and Macro bolted towards it, grabbing the lowest rung before it was yanked out of his reach.

"Would you stop doing that?!" he shrieked at the granbull.

Anchor laughed heartily. "See? What did I tell ya? Shrill!"

The neon beam ladder dragged them both upwards towards the blue belly of Wildcard Gamma. The giant schooling wishiwashi-themed

ship dominated the sky above Proxy City, casting its giant shadow down onto the rundown buildings miles below them. The ladder's beams blinked out one by one, allowing the ones below it to take one step after another towards the opening. Anchor dragged himself aboard before his beam reached it, then he stretched down a paw towards Macro.

The mawile's paw was dwarfed inside the granbull's claws and he was lifted effortlessly into the hatch. It hissed shut behind them and Macro let the panel beside the inside door read his paw print. The door opened with a sucking sound as air rushed out of it, blowing his fur back. Once they were both safely inside the confines of Wildcard Gamma, he instinctively went to wipe his paws down onto his scarf and froze, instead shaking them off and checking over his yellow fur. Dusty. Or grimy. He couldn't really tell. He snorted and yanked the mask off his face, taking a deep breath of clean air before turning into the narrow corridor leading to the cockpit.

"Another successful mission, eh?" Anchor said as he removed his own mask.

"It could've gone better." Macro rubbed at the jagged scar over the left side of his muzzle. "Anyway, at least we can afford to eat for the next couple of months."

"That's what I like to hear!" The jovial voice came from the kitchen.

Macro glanced over at the door, meeting the beaming eyes of their chef, Cookie. The brown slurpuff licked his lips and gave the two pokemon a happy nod.

"Welcome back then, Captain!" he said. "I'll have supper ready soon! I made berry pancakes!"

Macro's mouth involuntarily filled with saliva and he turned his back on the slurpuff, raising his hand in a wave.

"I'll be waiting for the bell," he said.

Cookie chuckled and his feet shuffled over the floor as he returned to the kitchen. The slurpuff's shuffling feet were drowned out by Anchor's hulking footsteps as he fell in step beside the mawile, all the while humming a cheerful tune as they strode into the cockpit.

A lone ribombee sat by the navigation system with his back to them, watching the array of green and red blinking across the black holographic screen. He reached behind him to hand Macro his brass goggles that matched the bug pokemon's own.

"Thanks, Matrix," Macro said as he took them.

It always irked him how he couldn't wear them with those horrible masks. They weren't even a necessity, he just liked wearing them, much like he did his scarf. He yanked the black scarf from his neck and strutted over to the two seats at the front.

"What gets out muk and grimer stains?" he asked.

"Fire," replied Matrix.

Macro let out a frustrated sigh and tossed the scarf into the nearest trash can. The stench of muk wafted up from it and he realised bitterly that he'd have to toss the contents of the bin into the septic tank. He hoisted it into his arms and wobbled towards the corridor.

"You may as well shower while you're at it," said Anchor.

Macro craned his neck around to leer at him, but the granbull was sat in the cockpit with his back to him. He hoped he'd caught his leer in the window's reflection.

"We'll be breaking the atmosphere soon," Anchor went on. "So brace yourself. Don't slip or anything."

Macro muttered under his breath and lugged the massive trash can all the way to the wash room. It felt like a trek but it was situated almost opposite the kitchen and dining room. Unfortunately it wasn't

the best place to have a septic tank. He held his breath as he opened it up and lobbed the entire trash can inside before slamming it shut and activating the air purifier.

Another quick examine of his fur told him he did indeed need a shower. His thick, yellow coat was likely holding half of Proxy City's putrid air not to mention muk slime and whatever else he'd picked up from the streets.

He removed his goggles and utility belt, setting them safely on the side and double checking his twin laser guns were set to safety. There was no sense in risking a hole torn through the side of his prized ship. He stepped into the shower and the water cascaded down on top of him, making him wonder once again why on earth he'd chosen it to be lavender scented.

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One shower and fresh scarf later, Macro strode back into the cockpit. Anchor instantly stood up and moved past him, momentarily considering giving the mawile a friendly pat on the shoulder and reconsidering it. The stink of city air wafted from his pink fur as he made his way towards the wash room. Macro flopped into the seat beside the driver's chair and kicked his feet up onto the dashboard.

"What's our next target?" he asked Matrix.

The ribombee glanced up at him and cleared the radar screen to bring up a string of 'job requests' - most of them simply targets for looting. Macro felt a flood of relief that the next job wouldn't be another trek into the filthy outskirts of Meta City.

"Machine shop raid," Matrix read out. "Ice types want laser gun components and the government have shut down their factories."

"It was only a matter of time," said Macro. "The ice type has many weaknesses and Socket just wants to keep that fear inside us all."

"Well, they're probably not gonna be too happy with you striding in there to offer them the parts," said Matrix. "You're a steel type. They might see you as a threat. You'll be blasted with fire and ground lasers before you can even blink."

"For the price I'm gonna charge 'em, it's a risk I'm willing to take." Matrix nodded towards the computer. "Tell 'em Wildcard's on it and we'll raid the nearest machine shop." He hesitated and squinted at the tiny text near impossible to read from his seat. "What city are they in?"

"Boolean."

"Good. One of them flyin' ones. That means it's got clean air."

"The machine shop we're targeting is on System Ground, however."

Macro's heart sank so quickly he lost his appetite. His head dropped into his paws and he let out a long groan.

"Don't worry, though," said Matrix. "It's in Wave City. Much less toxic so you can wear your goggles."

"Fantastic. Program it in and let's go and get some lunch."

Matrix's small paws flew over the holographic screen, and he buzzed out of his seat just in time for the supper bell to ring. Cookie's jovial voice called to them from the kitchen, ringing out louder than the bell. The chubby slurpuff waved a chocolate-coated ladle at them and bobbed back through the kitchen door.

The low table was heaped with berry pancakes, smoothies and various toppings including chocolate drizzle. Macro hopped into a chair and piled up his plate, being sure to go extra heavy on the chocolate.

"Ah, my nose is twitching." Anchor strode into the kitchen wearing a massive grin as he toweled off his mohawk.

He fell into a seat opposite the mawile and reached for the plate of pancakes.

"Just what I need after a hard day," he said. He looked over at Cookie. "You got any jaboca berries to go with it?"

Cookie's nose crinkled in a frown. "You're kidding, right?"

Anchor shrugged and reached for the bottle of nomel juice.

"How long until we reach Wave City?" Macro asked Matrix.

Anchor looked up with a start and licked nomel off his claws.

"About six hours," said Matrix. "Much less if we speed up but I imagine you'll want a rest and to wait until the early hours of the morning?"

Macro nodded. "Definitely."

"What's goin' on?" Anchor asked.

"We're raiding machine parts," Macro explained. "Ice types had their laser factory shut by Socket's reign of tyranny."

"Another one?" Anchor tutted and cut into his pancakes. "Poor lot. What'd she go and do that for?"

"Same reason as all the other times. Fear factor," Macro said bluntly.

"They'll be wiped out at this rate. Things are bad enough out there with this flippin' divide as it is. World's already a war zone. It's like she just wants to make things worse."

"Well, we'd best be prepared then," said Macro. "I doubt it'll be an easy job either. Busy bodies everywhere. You're gonna need to use your fists."

Anchor grunted and stuffed a fork of pancakes into his mouth. "I'll be sure to pack 'em then."

…

A/N - Please R&R! =D

Chapter 2

A/N - Thanks so much for the reviews and follows! =D I wasn't expecting them on the first chapter, so I'm really surprised! This is going up a day early since we're busy this weekend and I doubt I would have had much time to upload it tomorrow. Fridays will be my usual update days.

Chapter Two

System Ground looked like a toy town from Wildcard Gamma's exit hatch. Macro held on to one of the neon rails as he watched Wave City slowly move beneath them. From this height he could clearly make out the froth of the ocean as it lapped at the docks and cliff faces. Windmills turned in the wind miles out from the coast, and in the center of Wave City blinked the data antennae, flashing red and green and red and green as it received and sent out its signal across the whole of System.

"You ready?" Matrix's voice rang loud and clear in his ear piece.

"Ready when you are," Macro replied.

"All right. Then I'm gonna slow down enough for you to jump. I'll have to keep the ship moving though, otherwise they might open fire at us."

"Roger."

"Open fire, eh?" Anchor clutched tightly to his own rail, causing the spikes on his gauntlets to poke out. "Bring it on. We'll see who's left laughin'."

Macro chuckled drily and readjusted his goggles over his eyes.

The ground slowed and Macro waited a few moments until he spotted a wide enough space to drop into. It wasn't impossible to see

in the dark. Lights dotted the city, casting a dramatic array of shadows across the artificial grass. When the City Square appeared beneath them, Macro dropped. Wind whisked past his ears and whipped his scarf up around his face, drowning out the repetitive 'chink' as each rail flashed into place above them.

Within seconds, his feet were on solid ground. Anchor dropped down beside him into a crouch and the pair of them looked up as the neon ladder flashed back up to the hatch.

The granbull let out a long whistle as he diverted his attention to the tall, white and platinum buildings around them.

"Been a while since I've seen a city this clean," he said.

Macro made a grunt of agreement. "I still wouldn't drink the ocean water, though."

He quickly checked the map on his optical display and motioned for Anchor to follow him. The narrow streets were lifeless save for the bright, animated billboards that filled huge sections of wall on every building they passed. Each one was an advertisement for bands, clubs, drinks and the latest games. Many of them came with audio - a catchy, electronic tune or a catch-phrase to further drum the advert home.

What made Wave City radically different from the poorer, toxic towns of System Ground wasn't just the clean and tidy buildings and artificial grass. It was the lack of toxins in the air. Standing like silent sentries between the street lights were artificial trees. Structures of iron with flat, metal plates to serve as leaves. Operated solely on solar power, they drew in the contaminated air and blasted it back out again through filters. A hidden mechanism stored up electricity to keep them running during the night and overcast days, but the idea of solar powered air filters had left pokemon feeling uncertain about the trees' efficiency. Despite the skepticism, they'd certainly held up for the past century or two. The air was breathable and as such

allowed berry plants to be grown, but they were never as healthy as those grown in System Sky.

"Here it is." Macro stopped beside a large factory sporting a billboard for the next Assassin Strike VR game.

The building looked no more out of place than the school or apartment blocks. The only difference was the water wheel turning slowly as water was gathered from the ocean and cascaded down on top of it from a neatly hidden pipe. Situated by the docs, the factory generated all the power it needed from the ocean. The clean energy promotion in Wave City went strongly in its favour to clean up the air, but not every city was so inclined to make that step. In most cases it was too late, anyway. Proxy alone would take many years to clean up.

The water wheel creaked and groaned as it rotated, and water splashed back down from it, forcing it under the shallow tide.

"I doubt this factory is empty," Macro said quietly. "Otherwise they wouldn't have the wheel running."

"Night staff?" Anchor grunted.

Macro nodded and moved slowly around the factory's perimeter. Long windows protected by heavy iron bars rose up for three floors and not one of them appeared to have a light on. If there were any night staff, then they were probably just guards sat in a security room somewhere. That meant they probably knew he was there, but he couldn't see a security camera anywhere.

He paused and craned his neck up towards the roof. No camera. At least not a visible one. A high profile place like a weapons factory would be using a stealth. One that recorded not only video but audio as well. Full colour, high definition…

He rejoined Anchor from the other side and stared up at the iron doors. He wanted to say it wouldn't be easy, but once they were

inside, it would be fun and games. Grab the loot, foil the guards and run. It's not as if they didn't know him. Wildcard Gamma and its captain were known everywhere. He could already picture the guards reaching for their lasers to fend them off, maybe even calculating the bounty they'd receive for turning him in to the authorities.

A smirk spread across his muzzle and he chuckled. He wasn't about to give them that pleasure.

"All right." He reached into his pouch and pulled out a long, black metal needle. "Let's get this over with."

"Front entrance, eh?" Anchor nodded as he watched the mawile jiggle the needle in the lock. "I like it."

"Well, the windows are all barred up and I have no patience to saw through them." The lock snapped and he stuffed the needle back into his pouch. "Would make way too much noise anyway."

With a hefty kick, the door swung inwards and Macro reached for his laser. They were immediately met by three large pokemon rushing straight at them. The first was a machoke followed closely by a swampert. Macro let out a small laugh as he readied his laser and ducked beneath the machoke's flailing fist. He brought his horn up beneath the fighting pokemon's chin where it struck him with a sick crack and sent him soaring over his head. He set his laser to grass and fired at the swampert, blasting him backwards into the wall where he lay, dazed.

Macro turned back to Anchor who was stood over the machoke and a floatzel. Both were sparking dangerously, as were the gauntlets on his fists. He looked back up at Macro and nodded, stepping over the two fallen guards.

"I doubt that's all of them," said Macro. "Be on the look out."

He flashed his optical display on and brought up a map of the interior, conveniently provided by Matrix. Three floors. The first was mostly factory and staff facilities. The second floor was all factory and the third and final, admin and storage. Macro tutted loudly and scouted out the nearest elevator.

"We need to go up to the top," he said.

"Seriously?" Anchor called the elevator. Twice. Three times. "Not workin'."

Macro tutted again and made for the stairs. Each one almost came up to his chin. A silent insult hidden away under the stature of the factory's chosen employee criteria. He scrambled over each one as Anchor plodded effortlessly up them beside him. After the first half-flight, the mawile was practically gasping for breath. He flinched as a loud siren blared from a speaker above his head, followed by an ear-splitting ring that competed with the siren and almost shook the very foundations.

"Come on, Cap'n." Anchor sighed and shook his head. "Don't take this the wrong way, now."

The granbull stooped and picked him up, hoisting him onto his shoulder. Macro bit back a snide remark and resigned himself to being lugged up the next flight and a half. The third floor sported a set of double doors with an alarm bar across them. It was kind of redundant with the noise the building was already making.

Anchor set Macro back down and flexed his knuckles, pushing the lethal spikes out from his gauntlets. Macro quickly brushed himself down and readied his laser. There was someone on the other side of those doors, he could smell it.

The granbull smashed the door open, adding to the crescendo of alarms as the bar shattered beneath his fists. Two lombre leapt out from the splintered wood and landed between them, each of them raising their claws as they braced themselves to attack. During a

time where the fire, grass and water type pokemon were constantly at each other's necks, lombre had a hard time fitting in, being forced to choose between grass or water as their primary element. These two had decided to blend in with the water types of Wave City as a pair of limber grass/water guards for the very factory Macro and his team planned to raid. How convenient.

"Great," Macro snarled. "My weapon can't do nothin' to these two."

"Snap," said Anchor as he flexed his gauntlets. "Gonna have to use force, Cap'n."

Macro span, swinging his horn at the nearest one. The lombre leapt into the air and kicked himself back from the ceiling. The lily pad on his head lit up with a purple light and he spiraled back down towards Macro for a nasty zen headbutt.

The mawile narrowly dodged it and caught him in the back with his horn, sending the lombre rolling down the stairs. He turned to grab the other lombre in his jaws but a torrent of steaming water shot up the stairs and nipped his foot and fur.

"Yowch!" He leapt backwards, swatting at his singed toes to remove the burning water.

The lombre zipped in front of him, cutting him off from the twin as it backed Anchor into a corner. The granbull's sparking gauntlets collided with his assailant's jaw but it only caused the grass/water pokemon to frown and nut him with a zen headbutt. Anchor grunted and slumped to the floor. Now free from the gauntlet-wielding granbull, the lombre rounded on Macro.

"Great," said Macro. "Got you both now, have I?"

He felt the wall against his horn and he faltered as both leering lombre advanced towards him. He raised his gun, turning the dial from grass to water then to ground. The only three in his arsenal. He'd never considered he might need a flying laser before. He filed a

mental note to upgrade just before the gun was violently swatted from his paws. It clattered to the floor, releasing its catch and sending a shockwave into the ceiling. Plaster tore free and rained down upon them, crashing onto the head of the closest lombre. Macro coughed as the dust filled his throat and he placed a paw over his muzzle, raising the other to shield his head from the debris.

The remaining lombre was lifted from his vision and tossed aside like a pokedoll. Anchor's face loomed over him, sporting a black eye and a crooked tooth. He thrust Macro's laser back into his paws.

"We weren't meant to bring the whole place down!" He grabbed Macro's arm and dragged him through the splintered doors.

"I'm not the one who dropped it!" Macro retorted.

"But you took the flippin' safety off though, right?"

"I was trying to defend myself!"

The granbull skidded to a halt half way down the corridor and eyed a heavy, cast-iron door. "Think this is it."

It wasn't the only room in the corridor. It had about five or six before it ended at another set of double doors that led to some unseen, hidden location Macro couldn't be bothered fussing over.

Now well and truly fed up, he aimed his ground laser at the heavy door. If it worked on steel type pokemon, it would have no problem against an iron door. His suspicions were rewarded as the laser tore a hefty hole through the structure, shredding the iron into jagged points that curled inwards around a perfectly formed circle hole.

Beyond it lay stacks of wooden boxes, each one named with the component they contained in nice, red letters.

Macro grinned from ear to ear. "Bingo!"

He leapt through the hole and scurried over to the crates, eying up their contents. Barrels, fibre amplifiers, filters, lasers of varying type concentrations. Ice types wanted enough to counter their many weaknesses. That meant they wanted water, ground, fire, psychic and flying lasers. He pulled a thick, leather bag from his pouch and began throwing them in by the pawful. Anchor stood by the door, waiting as the mawile scurried about in the storage room adding filters, barrels and other bits and pieces to his bag. It wasn't long until he needed to fill a second bag which Anchor threw at him in exchange for the first.

Once both were loaded up, they eyed the doors to the stairs warily. That ceiling had finished caving in, but it had left quite the obstacle course. The alarms were still blaring away and voices could be heard over them from either side as what he could only describe as an army clambered over the rubble on the stairs.

"Drat," Anchor muttered. "Didn't hear them coming over all this kerfuffle."

"Well we've got what we need," said Macro. "Let's head to the roof and call Matrix."

Easier said than done when the main stairs were out of action. He quickly checked the map and confirmed the double doors behind them led to the emergency exit. A narrow flight of stairs running down to the back door and up to the roof.

He nodded to Anchor, tossed the bag over his shoulder and bolted for the emergency exit. The granbull fell in step behind him, effortlessly carrying the second bag. The stairs were quickly flooding with various water type pokemon led by a blastoise. The hulking tortoise sent two jets of water at them from the cannons protruding from his shell. Macro let out a squeak as he dodged between them and sped for the stairs heading up. A cracking sound followed by a grunt told him Anchor had given the blastoise a nasty crack before making a bid for freedom.

"Ready your gun, Cap'n!"

The granbull relieved him of his bag and hoisted him onto his shoulder before leaping up the stairs two at a time. Having no free arms to message Wildcard Gamma, he instead barked into his wrist computer. Hopefully the chaos wouldn't drown it all out and leave them stranded.

Macro swiveled so he was facing the army and fired off grass lasers at their feet. Not striking to stun or to kill. Just to hold back. The blastoise leered up at them from the head of his water army, his left eye squinting as his cheek swelled in a ruby red bruise. Wartortle, marshstomp and prinplup gathered behind him and the blastoise flashed his sharp teeth in a snarl.

"Follow them!" he roared.

The smaller pokemon raced over the stairs but one or two were caught in Macro's firing line and sent rolling backwards down the narrow stairwell.

Anchor fired his fists at the lone door atop the stairs, shattering the alarm bar. It was useless. There was enough noise going on in the factory as it was.

Macro dropped from his shoulder and skittered across the roof, searching the dark sky for any sign of his ship.

"Try again!" he told Anchor.

Alarms still blared from the building, filling the entire city. Below them, pokemon had gathered in the streets to watch the spectacle, and the ocean behind them was filled with tiny lights from chinchou and lanturn. That ruled out escaping into the water.

The army flooded out onto the roof, followed closely by the blastoise captain. The hulking tortoise leered at them and aimed his water cannons.

"You're cornered," he snarled. "Give it up, Hunter, and drop those stolen weapons."

Macro snorted and raised his paws. "I ain't holdin' them."

The blastoise's lips curled back from his teeth. "Is this some kind of joke to you?!"

"A joke?" Macro laughed. "What do you take me for? Some performing mankey? This is simply a job, pal."

"It's theft!" The blastoise shook his head but his snarl never fell. "You're wanted all across System, Hunter, now turn yourself in or we'll have to take you by force! And I mean by force."

The water army braced themselves behind him, several of them moving in to the blastoise's flanks.

"Oh, you can try," said Macro. "You always try, but you never catch me."

A heavy shadow fell over the building and all eyes looked up at the large belly of the schooling wishiwashi ship. Neon bars flew down in the pink light ladder right above Anchor's head. The blastoise roared and fired his hydro cannons at the two pokemon. Anchor leapt for the ladder, taking hold of one of the higher bars and beginning is ascent towards the ship. Macro dodged the water and ran backwards, throwing himself over the edge of the building with a maniacal laugh.

"Whoa whoa!" Anchor barked. "Reverse!"

The ladder shot down from the ship in a repeated flash of pink, competing with the yellow flash from the ocean as the water dwellers prepared their electrical attacks. The granbull's gauntleted paw flailed feebly until the ladder was close enough to Macro for him to grab the bottom rung. It immediately began to ascend back up and Anchor let out a long sigh.

"You moron!" he roared. "What do you think you're playin' at?!"

Macro was still laughing as he looked back out at the factory. The ocean below was still flickering yellow as static electricity bounced across it amongst the chinchou and lanturns' lights. Many more were still gathering, but it was too little too late. Try as they may, the water army's attacks fell short of the ladder, carrying the electricity from the ocean only to have it fizzle out mere feet away from their targets. Each torrent lit up with a rhythmic red as the alarm light blared from the factory's roof. Red had always meant danger, and they'd narrowly escaped it. It was one of the closest calls he'd ever had and his heart was racing.

He ran a paw over the base of his horn and shook his head, his body still shaking with laughter. When they were safely inside the hatch he propped himself up against the wall as he tried to steady his breathing.

Anchor stared down at him and dropped the bags onto the floor.

"Anyone would think that blastoise were right," he said. "That this is some kind of joke to you."

Macro took a couple of deep breaths and looked out through the hatch window. Wave City rapidly shrank beneath them as the ship re-entered System Sky.

"You taunted him, Macro." Anchor's reflection folded his arms. "You always taunt them then you go and do something stupid! He's right, ain't he? It's just a massive joke!"

"The only joke is this pathetic world and its ruler." Macro turned from the window and waved a paw behind him. "Grab those bags, Anchor. We've got a job to finish."

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 3

A/N - Sorry for the slight delay in updating. I couldn't get online yesterday as my provider went down. We seem to be back up and running now though!

Thanks for all reviews, follows and faves =D

Chapter Three

Two sacks of laser components. Two bulging sacks.

Macro sorted through them, neatly arranging the lasers, barrels, filters, gears, screws, coils and heat elements into piles. There wasn't enough parts to meet the laser types. He'd gone a bit overboard with those. But seeing the parts laid out on his cockpit floor left him feeling tickled pink with glee.

"How many do you think we should give them?" Anchor asked.

"I'm thinkin' forty percent," said Macro. "Forty percent of the lasers. That means they get all the coils and most of the heat elements, and that leaves us with enough to sell on the black market."

Matrix picked up one of the coils and turned it around in his paws. "So that means we're taking a trip back to Pulse City?"

"Of course," said Macro as he gathered the items between two bags. "We need to refuel and clean out the septic tank 'n' all that jazz."

"That's cool," said Matrix. "I wouldn't mind checking out Assassin Strike anyway."

"We're not swinging by Boolean first to drop these off?" Anchor asked.

"As much as I'd like to do it all in one go, I'm not sure our fuel will last that long," said Macro. "I don't wanna be stranded anywhere."

"Suppose it makes sense. Just make sure you lock the rest of them away. Some of those pirates have got sticky paws."

"You know I'm always careful, Anchor."

The granbull snorted.

"Anyway," said Macro. "It'll be a nice change of pace to stop somewhere where less pokemon are after my head. Load up Pulse City, Matrix."

The ribombee returned to his spot by the navigation screen and keyed in the co-ordinates for Pulse City. Wildcard Gamma's location blinked on the screen as it rapidly zoomed out to reveal an intricate map of floating cities spreading across a void of black.

"Head due east," he said.

"Due east." Anchor stood and flopped into the driver's seat. "Gotcha!"

Macro hopped into the seat beside him and kicked his feet up onto the dashboard. The ship turned slowly then surged forwards, pushing him back into his seat. He buckled himself in and tucked his paws behind his head. With Wildcard Gamma's speed and efficiency, it wouldn't be too long until they reached Pulse City. He gazed out of the window at the passing stars blinking in the distance before they streaked by like silvery threads as his ship swam through the black sky.

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Pulse City loomed before them, its abstract, jagged structure further emphasized by the array of neon lights that dotted its various entertainment districts. 'Docks' was sprawled over the entrance and

was already filled to bursting with fish-shaped pirate ships. Wildcard Gamma slowly and carefully pulled in beside a gyarados, more so to avoid chipping the wishiwashi's paintwork than to prevent an encounter with a violent, moody pirate. Macro really didn't want to add another fresh layer of paint to cover a careless scuff on his prized ship.

The mawile hopped out of the exit hatch and landed in a crouch on the dirty docks. Despite the clean air that was in abundance in System Sky, space pirates weren't generally known for their cleanliness and care for nature. There were no wind farms up here, either. They were few and far between in System Sky due to the dramatic change in atmosphere that rendered air unbreathable unless on one of the islands where it was filtered to a safe level inside their plexiglass domes. Most cities got their energy from System Ground. Pulse City did just that… illegally. It wasn't unknown to the law enforcers, either. They'd do something about it if Pulse City weren't so dangerous. On more than one occasion the rogue city was plunged into darkness as the wireless signal leading up to the island was cut. On more than one occasion, Pulse City's biggest and baddest were sent down to the wind farm to 'fix things'. Eventually, the officials gave up and resigned to the illegal tapping of power.

The dock opened out into the neon-lit city streets. Pokemon of varying species stood outside the bars and clubs, talking loudly amongst themselves and laughing as frothy beer spilled over filthy glasses.

Matrix paused at the fork in the road and nodded to his right. "I'm gonna hit the games arcade."

"All right, pal," said Macro. "We'll see you in the lounge later."

The ribombee rose into the air and buzzed away into the busy street.

Macro gave Anchor a tap on the arm and marched down the central fork further into the vibrant city. Music blared from doorways,

creating an incomprehensible racket as the mix of sounds clashed that somehow some pokemon actually managed to dance to. Or just leap up and down bashing into one another. One 'dance' had got a little out of hand as a skuntank sunk his teeth into the throat of a vigoroth. The sloth pokemon swung his arms and sent the large skunk soaring overhead to crash into a lamp post. The bulb blinked out as the skuntank's eyes rolled back into his head and he slumped to the ground.

Macro strolled past him without batting an eye, keeping his attention on the sign in front of him. 'Market' was all it said. Well… 'mar-et'. The green 'k' had fallen off at some point.

The bustling building roared as he strode through the door. Pokemon leant over stall tables shouting and bartering with the owners or squabbling as they fought over the prized items. Eyes fell on Macro and Anchor as they cut through the rabble, gazing curiously at the leather sack strung over the granbull's shoulder. Expressions turned to fascination or disgust, and in some instances fury, but the pirates kept their distance. The bounty didn't apply in System Sky. Only on System Ground, and pirates were never rewarded by the government anyway. Reputation was all that mattered in Pulse City and Wildcard Gamma had that in buckets.

Macro spotted his target stall. A low table manned by a sewaddle. The caterpillar pokemon sported a torn leaf over his head and his left eye was misted over with what looked like a cataract but was actually a thin layer of everstone. The small pokemon was one of many that had undergone cybernetic enhancement. Whatever he'd had done, it was internal. The everstone was a necessity for such enhancements and the pokemon chose where to wear it. Many opted to have it placed into their bodies in some way so they wouldn't lose it, and Worm had chosen to have it placed in his eye. It might have cost him part of his vision, but the benefits outweighed the negatives. The amount of stress evolution caused on the body would disagree with enhancements. They couldn't evolve like a standard pokemon could. They stayed the same size forever. The

everstone was no fashion accessory, it was meant to stop him exploding.

"Good morning, Worm." Macro slammed his paws onto the table, grabbing the sewaddle's attention.

Worm's eyes widened briefly with surprise and he cleared his throat. "Not seen you in a while, Macro. What you been up to?"

"Business." The mawile nodded to Anchor. "We've got some stuff to sell you."

Worm huffed and he restrained himself from staring at the leather sack. "'Bout time. I'm runnin' dry here."

"Well, I think you'll appreciate this."

Anchor tossed the leather bag across the table and its contents spilled out beside the sewaddle. Heat elements and lasers pattered across the floor, and Worm curved his tail to stop them rolling under the table behind him. He let out a long whistle and stuck his head into the bag.

"Weapon parts!" He chuckled.

"Yup. And I'll do you a deal," said Macro. "Ten thousand credits for all that."

"Five."

"Seven. And I go no lower."

The small caterpillar sighed and flicked on his optical display. A sheet of green appeared over his right eye and he tapped at something Macro couldn't see from his position. The mawile's pouch beeped and his own display fired up of its own accord. An override. Worm knew what he was doing and he wanted Macro to be sure he'd actually paid. It saved accusations from pirates who'd lie in an attempt to scam.

Macro laughed and switched his display back off. "Pleasure doin' business with ya."

"As always." Worm began placing the parts on his table that were immediately predated upon by keen buyers. "No coils though. Not that I can see anyway."

"Sorry," said Macro. "They're all spoken for, I'm afraid."

"Can't spare any?" Worm asked. "I'll have a demand when pokemon get a look at all this."

"Nope." The mawile shrugged. "I've got a business to run and if I cut them out I lose a profit."

"What profit? You steal it all."

"A one hundred percent profit." Macro folded his arms and frowned at the bug pokemon. "If I sell some to you, I lose out."

Worm looked up at him and met his frown head on. "I'll give you seventy percent per coil."

Macro waved a paw at him and turned away.

"Eighty!" the sewaddle called. "Eighty-five!"

Macro looked back over his shoulder as he strolled away. "Look! If I get any more, I'll send 'em your way, right?"

Worm seethed silently and continued laying the parts on his table while trying to deal with the sudden rush of customers. Coils or not, those parts would fly off his stall. Laser parts often needed replacing, especially those custom built with the growing rise of a weapon ban.

"I'm gonna go get Matrix," Macro told Anchor. "I'll meet you back at the ship."

The granbull let out a grunt. "I was hoping to check out CyberTechnics before we took off."

"You're gonna buy bootleg technology?" Macro scoffed.

A weavile shot him a leer from a bar doorway and flexed his mechanical claws. Macro suppressed a chill down his spine and pretended he hadn't noticed.

"Pirates' gotta make a living somehow, Cap'n," said Anchor. "Besides. You should know yourself some of it's raided from System Ground."

"Yeh, well." Macro cleared his throat. "Just make sure it doesn't explode on my ship. I don't want to be dealing with another fire. You saw what happened to Wildcard Beta."

Anchor laughed and strode away from him down a narrow alley. "You're the one who won't shell out for a fire extinguisher, Cap'n. Ain't my fault."

Macro crinkled his muzzle and waved the granbull off as he followed the wider road around to the games arcade. The familiar, huge sign appeared above the tall buildings with Moonlight Lounge printed on it in giant, red letters against a white backdrop. The pixelated image of an inkay stood beside it with its tentacles raised, poised to strike.

Walking through the doorway was like walking into a cavern blocked up with a wall of stuffy, sweaty air. He dodged under the feet of a tyranitar, causing the large pokemon to side-step and slosh beer onto the floor. The monstrous, armored beast flashed his canines at him and stomped over to a low table to join a fraxure and vigoroth. The pair fixed the mawile with identical glares as they took their drinks from their tyranitar companion, and the small dragon pokemon took a huge bite from something that used to be some kind of water dwelling pokemon. The sight turned Macro's stomach and he pointedly averted his gaze to the rest of the lounge.

Glares and leers ran rampant amongst the occasional nods and smirks, but all of them washed over Macro like water off a ducklett's back. He found Matrix sat at an arcade terminal with a VR headset completely hiding his antennae. Whatever he could see was shown in first person on a large, holographic screen mounted on the wall. The ribombee was deeply engrossed in the game as his tiny paws raced over the control pad. Ordinarily, the game would be played with gestures and body movements but in such a crowded place it was common sense (and the laws of health and safety) to play them with a control pad. Such laws remained in Pulse City after the abundance of casualties that had resulted from senseless leaps and bounds from the larger pokemon who could see nothing of reality through their headsets.

Matrix wasn't alone, however. Three female pirates stood watching him, transfixed. Their attention drifted frequently from the screen to the small bug pokemon. Two of the girls were familiar to Macro as Matrix's 'fangirls'. The young froslass and illumise stood unnecessarily close while a completely unfamiliar bipedal zigzagoon leant against the game terminal on one elbow. The brown, sleeveless waistcoat she wore was immaculate - likely new - and just barely covered her belt and laser gun. A black and green checkered bandana covered her right ear and almost fell over her eye. She brushed it back when she saw Macro and a smirk tugged at the corner of her lips.

"Friend of yours?" She nodded to the small bug.

Macro let out a snort and slammed a paw down on the back of Matrix's chair. He didn't so much as flinch.

"I wouldn't go so far as to call him a friend," he told the zigzagoon. "You ready, Matrix?"

"Just a sec." Matrix leant forward slightly in his seat as he smashed one of the buttons frantically.

The zigzagoon chuckled and turned so she had her back on the machine. She folded her arms neatly, but her eye never left the mawile.

"I was gonna ask for his number," she said. "Then you showed up."

Macro snorted. "I wouldn't bother wasting your time."

"On him or you?"

"Either of us." Macro's eye drifted up to the game display as a set of claws sent a druddigon's head rolling across the tarmac floor. "I'm too busy, and despite being eighteen, I'm not even sure Matrix here even knows what a girl is."

"I know what a girl is, Macro," the ribombee retorted.

"Yeh? Well you don't act like it."

Matrix merely shrugged.

"Anyway," Macro went on. "Wrap this up. Anchor will beat us back to the ship at this rate."

"It's not a race," said Matrix. "Pull up a seat while I finish this level."

Macro sighed and leant on the back of Matrix's seat. No, it wasn't a race, but he wanted to refuel and hurry to Boolean City before it went dark. Again.

"Macro, right?" He heard the zigzagoon shuffle against the computer. "The name's Surge."

Macro looked up at her. She was still watching him, still wearing that smirk. He didn't know why she was introducing herself. He didn't even know the names of the other two girls, and he could have bet his goggles that Matrix hadn't a clue either. Even if they'd told him, it would have gone through one ear and straight out the other.

He grunted as he turned back to the computer screen.

"Well, isn't that interesting." She chuckled and shook her head. "I've seen your posters everywhere. So you use an alias? You've got quite the bounty on your head."

Macro's fur began to stand on end. He really didn't like where this was going. He reached over the chair and took the controller from Matrix's paws.

"Hey!" The ribombee removed his headset and span his head around to look at him.

"We're leaving." Macro tossed the controller onto the seat beside him and turned to march away.

Matrix shook out his antennae and fluttered after him, his wings creating a dull drone in the din of the lounge.

"You can't have a little patience?" Matrix whined.

Macro continued marching forwards, repressing the urge to check for both his lasers. It wasn't unheard of for a pirate to risk turning in another for a quick credit, and he was convinced he could still feel the zigagoon's eyes on him. He wouldn't feel as anxious if he'd seen her around before. New pirates came and went, but an unfamiliar face poking around and pointing out his bounty had left a bitter taste in his mouth.

He took in a deep breath of outside air, refreshing after the stench of sweat and beer that filled the lounge. His feet kept moving along with a will of their own as he retraced his steps back to the docks. Matrix flew silently along beside him, occasionally glancing at him out of the corner of his eye.

Every pirate they passed had a threatening air about them now. Crimson leers and flexed claws burned into him from bar doorways

and outside tables, every tiny movement causing his eyes to flit towards them like a magnet to steel.

Matrix let out a long breath and shook his head. "Is something wrong?"

"Yeh," he said. "That zigzagoon fangirl of yours was asking too many questions."

"She was only trying to have a conversation with you."

"How long have you been a pirate for?" Macro locked the ribombee in a violet stare.

Matrix shrugged. "I dunno. Two years?"

"Well I've been one for a lot longer. I know what goes on in their heads. It's always money and survival. Making a profit. Looking out for Number One. No matter at what cost."

"So you didn't trust her."

"I didn't trust her as far as I could throw her." Macro paused and glanced back over his shoulder. "Which would be pretty far, believe me."

Matrix chuckled and adjusted his goggles on his head. They'd been shunted at a quirky angle from the head set making him look like a cartoon.

When the familiar, blue hull of Wildcard Gamma came into view, Macro felt a weight lift off his shoulders. Anchor was already stood beside it, tapping his foot as he stared at the fuel pipe. His nose twitched and he gave a curt nod as he took a step back from the ship.

"I thought I'd save you the job," he said. "Clean out is done. Just have to wait for the fuel tank to fill now."

He looked up at Macro and the mawile did a double-take. Anchor's right eye was covered by a silvery circle of glass encased in a silver frame. Leather straps looped over his right ear, holding the device in place.

"So you fell for one of CyberTechnics' new fads?" he scoffed.

Anchor grunted and looked back down at the pipe. "It's a heat tracker. I've been wanting one for like a month now, and after my share of today's profits, I could finally afford one."

Macro shook his head slowly and climbed up the neon ladder to board his ship.

"How long until we're fully fueled up?" he asked.

"Fifteen minutes," said Anchor.

"Great. Matrix, set co-ordinates for Boolean." He watched the ribombee zip past him. His next sentence came out a lot quieter, and he was convinced not even Anchor heard it. "I'm gonna have a lie down."

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 4

Chapter Four

"Cap'n! Cap'n!"

Macro's eyes fluttered open and he pushed himself up, letting the light blankets fall off him onto his knees. Anchor stood in his bedroom doorway, scratching absently behind his left ear.

"What is it?" the mawile asked as he rubbed a paw over his eyes.

"I'm sorry to wake you," Anchor said. "But Matrix says we're being followed."

If Macro wasn't awake before, he was now. He swung his legs over the edge of his bed and slipped to the floor, grabbing his goggles off his night stand.

"What do you mean followed?" he scoffed as he marched from his room.

"Navigation system's picking up on another ship," said Anchor. "It's blinkin' away like no one's business. He said it's been like that since shortly after we left Pulse City."

"So it's another pirate?"

"Either that or someone lurking around, waiting to tag onto a familiar ship. I mean, the price on your head is hardly small, Cap'n."

Macro snorted and marched down the corridor towards the cockpit. Cookie's round face peered at them from the kitchen as he licked berry sauce off his ladle.

The cockpit was filled with beeping. Matrix shot them a glance from his spot at the navigation desk and watched Macro as he fell into his

usual seat at the front.

"What's going on, Matrix?" he asked. "Anchor says we're being followed?"

"'Stalked' would be the better term," the ribombee explained. "I tried to lose them by taking a huge detour towards Cyan City, but they followed us the entire way. They even waited when I pulled over for a few minutes, drifting around absently. I thought they were going to land in Cyan, but after I set off, they tailed after us again."

He pointed at the flashing red dot on the screen. Just a dot. No description of the ship, no indication of its size. Nothing to say if it was government, rogue, or space pirate. It could be anyone. For any reason.

"Is it the same ship?" Macro asked. "Are you sure of that?"

"Who else could it be?" Matrix shrugged. "Why would two different ships follow us so closely?"

"Tag team?" Anchor suggested.

"That makes it the same pokemon, technically," said Matrix. "The fact is, we're being followed. And we're not even at Boolean City yet. What do you suggest we do?"

Macro stared at the navigation screen and pursed his lips together. They had means in place for times like this, but they used a lot of fuel and there was no saying they'd have enough to get back to Pulse City for a top up after their visit to the frozen floating city.

"We need a plan A and a plan B." He turned in his seat to face the window. "Speed up and try to lose it. Failing that, throw up the cloak."

"The cloak won't take us off their radar," Matrix explained.

"No, but they won't be able to see us," said Macro. "And there's no saying they even have a radar, especially with how closely they're following."

"Fair point." Matrix leant his head on his paw and sighed. "Let's just hope you're right."

"What about plan C?" Anchor asked as he pushed the accelerator stick forwards slowly.

"We don't use plan C unless they start to fire," said Macro. "It'll burn through fuel like fire through an abomasnow."

Anchor laughed and struck his paw on the dashboard.

Wildcard Gamma sped forwards, the lights from the passing cities streaking by beside them. Macro craned his neck around to see the navigation display. The red, blinking dot fell further and further back. But then… it sped up itself. Tailing them like a little hatchling.

He grit his teeth together and tutted.

"Plan B?" Anchor asked.

"No, not yet. It uses too much fuel," said Macro. "Just keep going."

The incessant beeping filled their ears as all eyes remained on either the lights streaming by or the navigation display. That blinking, red dot tailed after them at a steady pace, matching their speed perfectly. It didn't fall behind or draw closer. If Macro hadn't been so sure it was a deliberate attempt to follow them from Matrix's description, he'd have thought they'd accidentally towed another ship behind them.

"Hang on." Anchor grabbed the steering stick in his right paw and pulled it towards him. "I've got a plan."

The ship moved upwards, pushing Macro back into his seat and causing a little yelp from Matrix as he slipped from his chair.

"What are you doing?" Macro squeaked.

"Driving through a trash belt," explained the granbull. "See how much they like that."

"Well, I don't like it! You'll get my ship dirty!"

"I'll be careful. Anyway, it's only a bit of old paper and food waste."

"And sewage!" said Macro. "Don't forget sewage!"

As the ship leveled out, a stream of trash filled the world outside. Metal objects, fluttering sheets of old paper and indescribable sludge spread out like a hideous river. Macro's nose crinkled at the sheer thought of the smell and he considered grabbing his mask. No sooner had they seen it, it filled the window. Paper clung to the glass and blew off again, leaving behind sticky marks that pushed bile up into the mawile's throat.

Anchor grunted and cast him a sideways glance. "Sorry, Cap'n."

Macro threw a paw over his face and slumped back into his seat with a groan.

"I think it's working," said Matrix. "They're hesitating."

Macro spread his claws to see the blinking dot hovering further behind them. It arced to the side, edging towards the outer circumference of the radar.

"It looks like we're losing them," Matrix said.

"Anchor?" Macro turned to face the dog pokemon. "How big is this trash belt?"

"Miles," he replied.

"Then if they try to go around it, we'll have lost them." Macro grinned and rammed his fists onto the dashboard. "Great plan! You're a

genius, Anchor!"

The granbull chuckled and shook his head. "All in a day's work, Cap'n."

He pushed the accelerator forwards again and the ship lurched ahead, gradually picking up speed until the trash belt was nothing but an unpleasant memory and an unsightly smear on the windscreen.

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A vast, frozen landscape spread out before them, freezing Macro's feet to the bone. He hugged his scarf around himself and looked up at the tall, silvery buildings. Windmills turned slowly high above them, caught in the brisk breeze. Their lights lit up the darkening sky like silver and yellow stars.

"Any idea where this Cipher Frostwall is?" His breath misted in the air and he rubbed his paws over his arms.

Anchor punched a stubby finger over his wrist computer, grunting with frustration at its unresponsiveness.

"Not far," he finally answered. "Follow this road round and it's down a narrow alley just off it. We've not landed too far away, thankfully."

"Good. Because I'm turning into an icicle."

Anchor grunted again and crossed his arms over his chest as he fell into pace beside the mawile.

"I thought you resisted ice attacks," he said.

"I do," said Macro. "But I think as little of winter as a hibernating ursaring."

"Then I guess you won't be vacationing here any time soon then?"

Macro shuddered as the wind bit through his fur and he trudged on through the frozen wasteland. The granbull's feet crunched over the snow effortlessly, leaving deep, clawed paw prints beside the deep crevice Macro was leaving as he forced his way through. It melted against his fur, soaking through to his legs until they began to feel numb, but he resisted the urge to ask the much taller pokemon to carry him on his shoulder.

The road continued on past various shops, many of which were now closed. The only one open was a butchers displaying the poor, skinless bodies of various marine pokemon, each one sporting a hefty price tag. The smell turned Macro's stomach and he dug his claws into his arms as he forced himself past it.

A narrow alley forked off to their left, surrounded by piled up snow drifts that made the opening much narrower than it should have been. Anchor went first, slightly widening the gap as the mawile clambered after him. The building they sought stood at the end of it, squatting beside a wall topped with barbed wire. Jagged icicles hung from the wire and spread out onto the porch above the door like daggers. Or teeth. Cold droplets dripped from them and one landed down the back of Macro's neck. He stifled a squeak of shock and disgust and instead raised his paw to ring the bell beside the door.

"Who is it?" a female voice spoke clearly back at him.

"Hunter," he said. "We got what you asked for."

"Wait a moment."

Macro tapped his left claws on his right arm as he stared at the door. The sound of dripping behind him was leaving him on edge and his soaked fur was growing more and more uncomfortable despite the shelter the porch provided.

The door cracked open and a round face peered out at him. Blue and white with a beard of ice. A beartic.

"Hunter, eh?" The deep, masculine voice certainly didn't belong to the pokemon who'd answered his call.

Macro forced a grin and nodded to his large companion. "We've got the parts you requested."

"So it's you who took the request?" The beartic stifled a chuckle. "Didn't expect one of System's most wanted to brave Boolean City after Socket's crack-down on us. How much do we owe you?"

The beartic took the heavy sack from Anchor and opened it to peer inside. Macro didn't need to examine it again to double check the value. He'd done that enough times already. A grin split his face, and he leant against the porch door and immediately regretted it.

"Twenty thousand credits," he said.

The beartic looked up at him and his muzzle crinkled so much his lips pulled back from his teeth, sending a further chill through Macro's already frozen bones.

"Twenty thousand stinkin' credits for one sack of weapon parts?!" he roared.

Macro forced himself to stand up straight and he felt Anchor draw closer to him.

"Hey, I risked my hide to get those parts!" Macro retorted. "They ain't exactly easy to come by, or obtain. I think you'll find there's equal number of coils in there to fit each and every other piece to. You've got enough for…" The mawile threw his paws in the air and shrugged. "For like… twenty guns."

"A thousand credits a piece…" The beartic spat and it froze on the porch as soon as it touched it. "Lasers sold for six hundred a piece."

"Yeh, and now there's a ban." Macro shrugged again and he heard Anchor ram his fist into his open paw twice. "Call the rest a

commission fee."

The beartic's eye warily went to the granbull and he placed the sack of weapon parts behind him out of sight. His paw went to his belt and Macro was relieved to find he wasn't pulling out a gun but a pocket computer. The huge mammal didn't even look at it as he tapped at the holographic screen. Instantly, the mawile's pouch beeped and he switched on his optical display.

Twenty thousand five hundred credits.

"You overpaid," he said flatly.

"You're honest." The beartic stepped back into the building and pushed the door closed enough that only his muzzle was poking out. "I wanted to check exactly who I was dealing with. Keep it."

The door slammed shut, whipping up cold snow and shaking two of the icicles free. They smashed onto the concrete beside Macro and tiny shards clung to his yellow fur.

"Why did you tell him he overpaid?" Anchor asked.

"In case he knew." Macro tapped him on the paw and steered him away from Cipher Frostwall. "I didn't want an army of pokemon his size chasing after me. I think we've been chased enough today, don't you?"

Anchor laughed heartily and folded his arms. "Sure. Shall I call Matrix, or do you wanna sight-see?"

Macro snorted and looked away from him, his eyes drifting to the now near-black sky. Wildcard Gamma's shadow appeared above them, even darker yet only just visible to the trained eye. The neon pink ladder cut through the darkness, cascading down towards them with its familiar electronic 'chinks' as each one fired into place. The thought of being back on board his beloved ship already made him feel warmer.

Something else in the sky caught his eye and he looked up to his left. Three more shadows. Smaller. Heading right for them. His violet eyes widened and he edged closer to Anchor.

"Something wrong?" Anchor followed his gaze and his body stiffened. "Oh ratattas. That's not who was stalking us, is it?"

The ladder appeared just above Macro's head and he reached up and grabbed onto the lowest rung. Anchor took hold of one seven rungs up and stood with his feet just above the mawile's head. It whipped them up towards the exit hatch and cold air roared past his ears. But his eyes never left those three ships. They deviated to the right of Wildcard Gamma, spreading out slightly. Pointed. Golden.

He vanished into the exit hatch and it hissed shut behind him, closing out the freezing air. He took in a few deep breaths and shook water from his fur and scarf.

"Did you get a good look at them?" Anchor asked.

"Yes." Macro opened the inner door and stepped onto the ship, moving against the blast of warm air that blew yet more droplets from his body. "They weren't pirates, that's for certain."

"Government."

Macro nodded and felt his fur bristle. He marched into the cockpit and cast Matrix a look that froze the tiny bee pokemon to his seat.

"Did those ships show up on your radar?" he asked.

The ribombee nodded and his eyes drifted back to the monitor. Three blinking dots, arcing away from Wildcard Gamma until they reached outside of the radar's range of detection.

Anchor scratched the base of his mowhawk as he watched the display. "They're not our stalker, that's for certain."

"No," said Macro. "They're not." He moved over to his seat and sat down heavily. "Follow them."

"What?!" Matrix and Anchor rounded on him.

"I said follow them. I want to know what three of Socket's ships are doing over Boolean City right after a weapon ban."

"Surveillance?" Anchor growled.

"Surveying what? They've already got the place secure. They're clearly not after us, either."

"I think we should count our blessings they didn't even see us," said Anchor. "If they did, they'd be whaling on us! You're wanted dead or alive, Macro!"

"The bounty's higher if I'm alive." Macro kicked his feet up onto the dashboard and strained out his scarf onto the floor. "They're up to something. Follow them."

Anchor let out a flustered breath and shook his head as he fell into the driver's seat. "All right. But I'm throwing up our cloak. We ain't getting caught by Socket's lot. I'm too young for that nonsense."

Matrix cleared his throat and looked over at them. "I think that's a good idea. Because our stalker's come back."

…

The yellow ships kept ahead of them, almost vanishing into the blackness. Wildcard Gamma kept them in sight and on their radar as they followed them across System Sky. Macro's eye drifted to and from the fuel meter as the ship held up its cloaking device, making them invisible to the naked eye. Whether or not Socket's ships had radars he had no idea. If they did, surely they'd know they were being followed? Nevertheless, they kept moving onward in a steady line right towards the desolate areas of System Sky.

"Where are these guys going?" Anchor asked as he kept one paw on the accelerator to keep the ship at a steady speed.

"Oh, I've no idea," Macro chuckled. "But I can't wait to find out."

Anchor fired him a sideways leer. "This is just some kind of game to you, ain't it?"

"It's not a game, but it's fun."

"Fun? I'd hardly call chasing a government fleet 'fun'! I was always under the impression space pirates and the government stayed out of each other's way unless the law called for it."

"We're always against the law."

"Not all of them, Macro. Stealing, breaking and entering, trespassing. Yeh, sure. But this might very well result in murder if they start firing at us and we fire back."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, they break that law themselves every day since they stripped the rights right off the backs of the water dwellers."

"So you're saying you'll fight back and kill these pokemon?"

"I'm not saying that at all. You're twisting my words, Anchor." Macro tucked his paws behind his head and kept his eyes on the golden tails ahead of them. "But if they pick a fight with us, I'll fight back. Not shoot to kill, just stun. But I won't be taken guilty if their ships can't take a hit and crash."

Anchor's brow furrowed and he leant forwards in his seat. "Hang on. Hang on a stinkin' second, what's that?"

Macro squinted into the distance and let out a stunned 'huh'.

Standing black against the horizon was a squat structure, not dissimilar to one of the floating cities only a lot smaller. Red and

green flickered one after the other above it, indicating it was still on System's grid, whatever it was.

"How are we doing, Matrix?" he asked. "Does it say what this place is?"

Matrix 'hmm'd as he pawed at the holographic display.

"It's not on any maps," he said. "I should also tell you our stalker is still behind us, although a lot further back now."

So they had a radar then… Macro rubbed at the base of his horn and sighed. This could end up messy. Part of him wanted to turn back but the other part was incredibly curious and wanted to know not only what those ships were up to, but also what this place was.

"Bring her in to land," he said.

Anchor shot him a surprised glance but he pushed the steering stick forward, bringing the ship in for a land beside the huge, squat structure.

As they drew closer, the anomaly revealed itself to be a building. One huge building sat atop an island just like the other floating cities. But why would a lone building accommodate a floating island? Macro frowned and leant on the dashboard to get a better look. The golden ships vanished out of view into a tunnel below the structure. He briefly considered following them, but his ship would likely get stuck in that narrow opening.

"You might need to bring her over it and let us out that way," he said.

"Nah," said Anchor. "I'm looking for a safer, more secluded spot. I'm not getting us fired at."

"The cloak is up!"

"It won't be for much longer if we don't wanna end up stranded, Cap'n."

Macro looked down at the fuel meter. It was already down to half. The increased speed and use of the cloak had cost them greatly, leaving them with just more than enough to get back to Pulse City for a re-fill. That was if they didn't need to fight and keep using the ship's cloaking device.

"All right," he breathed.

He watched the building drift by as Wildcard Gamma drifted slowly along beside it, following the jagged circumference around the small, squat island. What windows the building had were dark. Not a single light on behind them, at least not that he could see. He also didn't see a single door. His heart sank at the possibility that the only entrance was the one the golden ships had taken.

All the way around the building was a short stretch of flat land that reflected the antenna's red and green light. Sheet metal. The building itself was concrete and iron, and the single most dull and boring building he'd ever seen. Nothing indicated what it was other than the presence of those ships. If he'd come across it by accident he'd have dismissed it as abandoned.

But he'd have still wanted a good look. An isolated building, as boring as it might be, still piqued his curiosity.

The ship followed the sharp bend and the huge windscreen fell upon a short dock poking out from the far end. And just at the end of that dock, a set of double doors leading into the building. Or out of it, depending on what they were primarily used for. He guessed out.

"Let me out there." Macro pointed at the docks.

Anchor didn't even nod. He dragged the large wishiwashi ship towards the docks at a slugma's pace. Macro folded his arms and rapped his claws against his arm as he watched the passing building. His ears twitched as Matrix began to hum, his boyish voice wavering as he fidgeted in his seat.

Finally, the nose of the wishiwashi reached the docks and Macro leapt from his seat. His still-damp fur had left a wet patch on the leather and it stuck to it, tugging a few looser tufts free. He beat himself down as he rushed out of the cockpit for the hatch.

"You ain't going alone, Cap'n." Anchor trudged after him, checking the straps on his heat tracker.

"I'd expect nothing less." Macro reached the hatch and pushed the button for the ladder.

The ground wasn't too far below him. He could easily have jumped. Three rungs and his feet touched cold metal. He scanned his eyes over the building - large but squat. A single story tall. The pokemon it contained must have been huge. He guessed tyranitar or rhydon. Maybe even aggron. All of them spelled bad news for him and his crew, regardless. They were all capable of dealing with fairy types, even if it was tyranitar's weakness. He pushed the thought to the back of his mind and made for the double doors.

Locked.

He tutted and folded his arms as he looked the doors up and down. No visible alarm, but if it was a secret government building then it had to have one hidden somewhere, most likely the other side in the form of a bar running across it.

He reached into his pouch and pulled out his lock pick.

Anchor shifted behind him as he jiggled the slender metal rod around inside the lock. After a few twists and turns, the lock snapped open and he forced his claws between the two doors and tugged it open.

Silence.

He let out a sigh of relief. Part of him had been worried prising the lock open wouldn't be enough.

"I see cameras," said Anchor.

Macro looked up at him and followed his gaze to the roof of the building. They'd not been easy to spot at first glance, but hidden below the roof were black, concave sheets of glass tucked away in the shadows. Not quite hidden cameras, but hidden enough to say 'we're watching you'.

He swallowed drily and ducked into the building. Anchor's heavy footing was oddly quiet as he followed closely behind him. The building stood in complete darkness. Not a sound came from further ahead. The only sounds were their footsteps and breathing and the occasional sniff from Anchor as he scouted out whoever might be lurking ahead.

Macro stretched out a paw as the corridor grew darker and his claws brushed against wood. His eyes snapped to the object and he could just make out a large wooden box not much bigger than himself. He rummaged in his pouch and tugged out a tiny flashlight. The LED bulb submerged the box and a small patch of wall behind it in a soft, white light. Macro squinted at the wooden crate. It was like any other shipping crate except it lacked an address or destination. All it had written on it in red words were two short sentences. 'This way up' with an arrow pointing towards the ceiling, and 'confidential'. It was the second word that made Macro break into a smile and practically bounce with glee.

"All right, Anchor. Grab it. We're off."

The granbull didn't so much as question him. He grabbed the box in both paws and stomped after him back towards the dock. Macro cast a glance back over his shoulder as he reached the door, looking past Anchor into the shadows. Nothing.

It seemed too easy.

He stepped back out onto the docks and made for the neon ladder.

"All right, lets get that crate on board and -"

A jolt of electricity bounced before his toes, freezing him to the spot. He looked up to his left and grit his teeth together as he saw a heliolisk rushing towards him, his eyes completely covered by a strange, long eyepiece Macro recognised as an old-fashioned heat tracker. The device was cumbersome in that it sacrificed the use of both eyes for heat targeting while compromising the ability to spot non-heat-emitting threats.

Such as an iron beam.

Macro leapt back towards the doors and tore the alarm bar free, bringing it down in an arc towards the heliolisk. The large lizard spread out his frill and hissed, sending another jolt of electricity at both Macro and Anchor. Macro dodged and brought the bar up in an arc towards the reptile's chin while Anchor was engulfed in the electricity, dropping the crate to the floor with an almighty clatter.

The bar struck home, sending the heliolisk arcing backwards into the wall of the building. Macro span towards Anchor and barked commands at him until he pulled himself together and grabbed the now cracked crate. He pushed the granbull towards the hatch and glanced back down the docks. More pokemon had emerged now, not a single aggron or tyranitar amongst them. Most of them were electric types. A raichu, ampharos and electivire rushed towards them amongst a small pack of stoutland.

A low growl rose from Macro's throat and he followed Anchor into the hatch, giving the granbull a small shove so the door could close behind them. The ship shook as electricity engulfed it, knocking it sideways and causing both pokemon to slide back into the corridor.

"Matrix! Move it!" Macro screeched as he rushed back to his seat. "Pulse City!"

The ribombee keyed in the co-ordinates while Anchor, now relieved of the crate in the middle of the cockpit floor, shook out his stiff limbs

before taking his seat. He wobbled as the ship took another hit and the lights flickered ominously. Something had clearly been fried and Macro hoped deeply it wasn't too crucial.

The granbull steered the ship back up into the air, arcing back with such ferocity that it shoved them back into their seats and sent Matrix sprawling against the wall. Macro made a mental note to teach the ribombee the proper use of a seatbelt. The crate rushed out of the cockpit, followed by a shrill shriek from the kitchen.

"I don't like this, Cap'n!" Anchor's voice came out hoarse.

The mawile was too busy focusing on what was in front of them to fully realise that he was talking about the very thing he was seeing. Not three, but seven of those gold ships soared around the corner, firing red lasers at Wildcard Gamma.

"Engage Schooling and fire back!" he commanded.

Anchor obeyed, his nimble paws flying over the dashboard as he pressed at various buttons. The reassuring sound of the tiny wishiwashi escape pods popping out from their hold caused a small smile to play at Macro's lips. They didn't just serve as an emergency escape. He heard them clanking into place, creating a large ring around the main ship, then a deep whir as the tiny fish began to spin. A torrent of blue bubble-like bullets flew at the golden ships and exploded on impact, blowing back the front-most ships and sending them off balance.

It gave them enough time to turn Wildcard Gamma and begin to retreat. There was no need to keep fighting.

Another red laser clipped the ship's tail and Macro slammed his paws into the dashboard.

"We need to engage hyperdrive!" he said. "Otherwise they're gonna blow the ship's fins and tail off!"

"That's what you're worried about?!" Anchor roared.

The Schooling ships fired another jet of bubbles, striking the assailing ships and knocking one of them out of the sky to land atop the squat building. The electric pokemon below were focusing all their efforts on shocking Wildcard Gamma, aiming for the bubble-firing weapons.

Anchor gripped at the accelerator with such ferocity his knuckles turned white. His muzzle creased with frustration as he set the ship to fire once more.

"Why aren't we in hyperdrive?!" Macro shrieked.

"Because we're too close to their ships!" Anchor barked back. "The shock will end up knocking them out of the sky and there's nothing but ocean below us! Do you want your bounty to go up? 'Cos it will at this rate!"

Macro clawed at his own face and let out a frustrated growl. If they wanted to get away from this, he had to take things into his own paws. He leant across the dashboard and grabbed hold of the accelerator.

"Hey!" Anchor brought his spare fist down on top of Macro's horn. "You're gonna get us all killed!"

"I'm gonna get us out of here!" he roared back. "And don't strike me! It's mutiny!"

"Mutiny my tail!"

"Stop fighting!" Matrix screamed. "We've got bigger things to worry about! That stalker of ours is back!"

Macro twisted his head in Anchor's arms to look over at the ribombee. He released his grip on the granbull's left ear as he stared at the red dot behind them… slowly moving to their right. A shrill

hissing sound permeated the cockpit and all eyes went to the windshield as a torpedo shaped like a grinning carvannah dived into the group of golden ships, striking the central one and exploding in a violent shock wave. Wildcard Gamma was blown backwards, away from the fleet and past the assisting ship. All they saw was a flat, rudder-like tail as the small blue ship arced upwards and zipped out of sight above their heads.

Macro shook his head sharply and climbed back into his seat.

"Hyperdrive!" he commanded. "Quick!"

Anchor obliged, turning Wildcard Gamma away from the building and thrusting the accelerator forwards with all his weight. The ship lurched, plunging the cockpit into a deafening silence, and Macro found himself forced back into his seat with such intensity he through the fabric might swallow him.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 5

A/N - Thanks for all feedback so far! =D

Chapter Five

The small tympole ship drifted slowly down into Spool City. Filthy, yellow grime coated the windows that from the outside served as the tadpole pokemon's eyes but from the inside were a crucial means to see where one was going. With barely enough time to kick the ship's hover panels into place, the underbelly struck the tarmac then shot back into the air as they kicked in, allowing it to finally come to a smooth stop.

Surge swore under her breath as she snatched her mask from the glove compartment and strapped it over her face, leaving her bandana in place. She climbed into the air lock and waited for it to close behind her before opening the exit hatch. Air blasted out into the city as it hissed open, almost knocking her off her feet. She staggered out into the grime-filled streets, catching a glare from a nearby trash can. The garbordor inhabiting it ducked back under the lid, letting it clatter back into place.

The zigzagoon locked her ship and cast her eyes left and right. She'd landed right in one of the main roads with not a single vehicle in sight. Not even a hover-board to speak of. With the vast number of poison types that decided to live in the outskirts of Meta City, she found it odd to not see a single means of transport. Her tympole ship stood out like a sore paw pad at the best of times in System Ground and she briefly considered moving it closer to her destination.

Nah. No one would be able to get inside anyway.

The dingy road wound round into an alleyway and she stepped over spilled bin bags, deeply wishing the mask would filter out the putrid smells of rotting fruit and meat along with other waste that assaulted

her senses. The narrow alley opened up into another main road - the one she'd hoped to actually land in. Between a boarded up shop filled with torn posters and a club sporting a neon pink animated billboard stood a ragged little office with no sign to mark it. A sign would only cause the place more abuse than it already took.

She stuck her key in the lock and ducked into the room, trying not to choke on the smoke. A tall delphox looked up at her from a high-backed office chair and he removed his cigar from his mouth to puff out a stream of smoke before finally addressing her.

"You took your time."

Okay, so addressing her wasn't the best term to use. The zigzagoon marched past him and leant against a beaten filing cabinet.

"I'm sorry, Tracer." said Surge. "I got sidetracked."

"Clearly."

The other two occupants in the room glanced at her from their stations beside their computers. Defrag the lopunny flicked her ear back as she returned to her work while the eevee, Widget, was too occupied with whatever message board he was currently browsing.

"Where did your little endeavor take you?" Tracer asked.

"I was following Wildcard Gamma, like you asked," she said. "They don't live in Pulse City, you know. It took them a few days to actually show up."

"Did you manage to apprehend their captain?"

"You mean the sexy mawile?" A smirk tugged at her lips and Tracer's glare bounced off her harmlessly.

"Don't speak about Hunter like that," he said flatly. "I hired you for your chameleon abilities, not your flirtatious nature. You were meant

to catch him off guard and bring him in, just like you have done with several other space pirates."

"Well, I'm afraid I lost him."

Tracer rolled his eyes and flicked the ash from his cigar into an overflowing ashtray.

"Wildcard Gamma has some kind of cloaking mechanism," she said. "I was able to track them most of the way but they must have noticed and hit hyper drive. I lost them somewhere on the outskirts of System Sky."

"Outskirts…" Tracer scratched behind his ear. "There's nothing there."

Surge snorted. There was no way she was telling the detective she'd lost the ship at some kind of secret government base. Or that she'd fired at their fleet and took one of them out. She had no idea what had come over her at the time and the sheer memory of it turned her pads clammy. She absently wiped one down the fur of her chest and glanced over at the blackened window.

"You really need to get your air filter fixed," she said. "You'll make yourselves sick in all this smoke."

Tracer merely grunted but Widget fired her a cheeky smile.

"Some of us are enhanced to not get sick," he said.

Surge glared at the eevee then sighed. "Well, I think I'm going to get some rest. It'll be nice to sleep somewhere quiet for a change."

She opened the door to a cleaner, much less smoky area of the tiny building.

"Don't get too comfortable." She glanced over her shoulder at the delphox. "I'm sending you right back out in the morning."

"Back to Pulse City?" She wasn't sure why she asked. She knew the answer.

He nodded. "I can't pay you if I don't make any money, Surge. Socket won't pay me if she doesn't see any success, and pretty soon my account is going to run dry."

Surge gave a dry laugh. "Well, I'll keep trying to apprehend Hunter then, shall I? It'll be fun to play around with him a bit more."

"Don't take your time."

The door closed behind her and she stared at its dusty window. Tracer's ears were clearly defined beyond it, probably listening for her. Always listening.

Socket wouldn't pay him if she didn't see any success… she wouldn't pay him at all if she knew the mercenary he'd hired had attacked her fleet and blown up one of her ships. Surge tugged at her waistcoat and made her way towards the stairs. She needed to keep that wrapped up in a neat little bow.

…

Wildcard Gamma trundled along at a steady pace, making its way through the space pirate district a few miles outside of Pulse City. Colourful neon lights flickered from the smaller floating towns that surrounded it, their antennas rhythmically blinking red and green against the dark, star-filled sky.

Anchor strained against the crowbar as he prised open the wooden crate. Despite the crack in the side, it was impossibly difficult to open. Macro had considered using his horn to chew through it but he feared he'd damage whatever was inside.

"Come on, Anchor!" He clenched his paws together and bounced on his toes. "Put your back into it!"

The granbull flashed his sharp teeth as he threw himself against the metal rod. Wood splintered and groaned until the wooden panel began to peel free, revealing a row of sharp, silver nails.

"Whoever made this," he grunted, "really didn't want it to be opened by anyone but the one receiving it."

Matrix wound his antennae around in his paw and leant back into his seat. "If that were the case, why not put it in a code-controlled metal crate than some flimsy wooden box?"

Anchor snarled at him over his shoulder. "Flimsy?! You wanna try and prise this open?!"

The ribombee shrugged and diverted his gaze back to the crate.

Anchor roared and rammed his shoulder into the rod. It flew free from the box and Macro yelped and ducked as the crowbar soared over his head and clattered onto the dashboard. The mawile's eyes widened as he looked from the metal rod to Anchor.

"You nearly shattered my window!" he squeaked.

The granbull merely grunted as he used his paws to tug the rest of the panel free. It fell to the floor, the row of nails running around it reminiscent of some kind of deadly trap.

Macro moved around it to look inside the box. A gasp left his throat completely of its own accord and he raised a paw to scratch at the long fur around his ear.

A small pachirisu sat with her back against the crate, her head lolling against her chest. A small, silver antenna stuck out from behind her right ear topped with what he guessed was an LED bulb. A jack lead with a USB adapter lay curled up neatly beside her. Deep buzzing cut through the silence as Matrix hovered between them to get a closer look.

"What is she?" Anchor asked. "An android?"

"I've no idea," Macro reached into the box and ran his paw over the back of her head. "I'm guessing she has a switch or something."

All he felt was fur until his claws touched cold metal at the base of her skull. His first instinct was to yank his paw back. It felt unnatural. Some pokemon had modifications that were alien to their own bodies, but to have something embedded into one's skull was a ghastly idea. What made it worse was it felt like some kind of socket. He mentally reminded himself she was merely a robot and kept pawing around for a switch.

"Are you sure it's a good idea to switch it on?" Matrix asked.

"I dunno, but I'm curious," Macro explained. "I wanna see what it does. Besides, if it does work, we could make a fortune selling it! Androids are pretty rare."

"Rare?" Anchor scoffed. "I ain't even seen one before, or heard of anyone selling one. Robots, sure, but androids are too advanced. I mean, look at her. I could swear she's breathing."

"Probably just some kind of standby feature." Macro poked his tongue out between his lips as he felt around the socket again. "Ahah!"

His claws flicked over a tiny button that clicked away from him. The antenna behind the pachirisu's ear lit up with a soft blue light. She shifted and he sat back and watched as her eyes fluttered open. Her long black lashes contrasted with her white fur, and as they lifted revealed a pair of chocolate brown eyes. She raised a paw to rub at them then ran it through the long, blue fur between her blue ears.

"I'm still in this box?" She stretched and yawned widely. "Due to the damage, it is clear you didn't use the release feature."

"Release feature?" Macro looked up at the box.

It was a different view from the inside. Still wooden, still a crate, but attached to the ceiling was a metal catch. He grunted and pushed himself to his feet. He'd have needed a special scanner for that. Something to trigger it to fall open. The entire crate would have spread neatly on the floor, no force needed.

"It's amazing!" Anchor gasped. "So lifelike!"

The pachirisu rubbed at her eyes again and looked up at each of them in turn until they landed on Macro.

"I'm guessing you are Socket?" she asked.

The three space pirates stared back down at her with identical expressions of surprise.

Anchor leant in towards Macro and whispered, "Why does she think you're Socket?"

Macro felt a smirk tug at his lips that swiftly became a grin and he doubled over with laughter.

"We took a parcel that was supposed to go to the freakin' mayor?! Oh, this is too perfect!"

The pachirisu blinked. "You're taking me to Socket?"

"What?" Macro swiftly regained his composure and wiped a tear from his cheek. "Sure. We're taking you to Socket."

The pachirisu nodded and stared at the wooden wall before her. His heavy sarcasm had rolled straight off her.

"Then if you please," she said, "could you reboot my system then shut me back off? The first pokemon I should see should be Socket."

"Well, that ain't gonna work, is it?" Macro raised a paw and shrugged. "First pokemon you saw was me."

"My inbuilt FAQ tells me that a reboot is sufficient to perform a short-term memory wipe."

Anchor shifted uncomfortably. "Cap'n, this is freaking me out."

Matrix nodded slowly and landed back in his seat, his cream face oddly pale.

An android meant to be delivered to System's mayor. That explained the government fleet around that strange, squat building. Whatever it was, it clearly manufactured these androids. Or distributed them. Maybe even both. Macro watched the pachirisu as her large eyes remained fixed on the inside of the crate. What was Socket wanting with an android? Didn't she have enough pokemon working for her? Obtaining an android right after issuing yet another weapon ban while the pokemon were engaged in a low-key civil war… Unless she had a love of gadgets, then something wasn't right about this.

"I don't wanna switch you off," he said.

The pachirisu's eyes snapped up to meet his while Anchor let out a groan.

"Please switch it off," the granbull whined. "We know it works now, so let's board it back up and-"

Macro swatted the wooden panel back out of his large paws. "No. We're leaving her switched on."

The pachirisu blinked a few times. "But-"

"But nothing," said Macro. "How much time can a reboot wipe from your memory?"

"Searching." She stared blankly at the crate's interior again. "Thirty two minutes and twelve seconds."

"Wow." Anchor nodded slowly. "That's rather precise."

"Then how about this," said Macro. "You remain on for another… twenty five minutes. Have a walk around, spend some time with us, then we'll shut you back off again and deliver you to Socket."

Anchor's brow knitted together and he fixed Macro with a sideways look, but he didn't say anything despite his mouth opening and closing slightly as he looked back down at the pachirisu.

She stared down at her paws, her nose twitching as her eyes unfocused.

"Come on," Macro whined. "It must be cramped in there, right? So why not stretch…" He waved his paw up and down at her. "Whatever it is you have."

"Whatever I have?" She looked back up at him and inclined her head on one side. "What a funny thing to say."

"Wires then, or whatever it is you things use as muscles."

He stooped and grabbed her by the wrist, causing her to let out a little yelp. As he tugged her to her feet, any words he'd been planning on saying died on his tongue. Something wasn't right at all. She was warm. One could liken that to the mechanics whirring away, but what was really odd was the quick pulsing against his paw. He stared down at it, dumbfounded.

"Is there a problem?" she asked.

He licked his lips slowly and spoke, but he didn't look away from her tiny wrist. "You're alive?"

"Of course I'm alive. I'm a living computer."

His eyes narrowed and snapped back up to her, making Anchor and Matrix jump but the pachirisu didn't so much as flinch.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"My name is Download Database."

"And what were you made for?"

"That is confidential. I can only divulge that information with a password."

He released her wrist, letting it fall to her side and took a step back. Her eyes sparkled with life, but there was nothing else behind them. No identity. No curiosity. The look she gave her surroundings was nothing more than a way of taking in information.

This was a living creature, and there was nothing there. That explained the socket in the back of her skull. It was a means to download and upload information. Whoever had made her had taken everything, including her very identity, and replaced it with a computer.

If Socket had asked for this, then she was sick.

Anchor shifted slightly behind her. "Are you alright, Cap'n?"

Macro grit his teeth together and marched past her towards his room, slamming his door behind him so it shook the entire ship.

…

Socket stared out of the wide window at the bustling streets of Meta City. Mechanical trees wavered in the growing breeze while windmills turned above the tall buildings, their blades picking up speed as they turned every gust into valuable electricity. The repetitive jingling that filled her office would have grated on anyone else, but she'd tuned it out. It meant work was being done.

The gothitelle folded her arms as her attention turned to the sky. Where was it? What was taking so long?

"Madam Mayor?"

She looked over her shoulder at the door. A sparksurfer raichu stepped inside, his eyes flitting from left to right. He wasn't exactly an unfamiliar face in the capital, but he twitched like a hatchling who'd been separated from his mother.

"What is it, Yobi?" she asked.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news," he said. "It's about Download Database. I'm afraid-" He gulped as her eyes narrowed into slits. "I'm afraid it's been stolen."

The jingling came to a halt and the tiny head of a chingling looked up from the desk at the far end of the office. His tiny eyes practically sparkled with glee as he looked from the raichu to her and back.

"Stolen?" she asked. "How is that possible?"

"It was Wildcard Gamma," said Yobi. "They followed our fleet to the laboratory."

"Followed?"

He ducked back towards the doorway and waved his paws in a desperate attempt to quell her rising anger.

"There was only three of us!" His words raced out almost as one. "We couldn't have fought them! Our radar told us we were being followed, but the ship was cloaked! We weren't even sure who it was. The best plan was to let them follow us and regroup at the lab. Fight back, all ships and pokemon! We didn't know it was Hunter, Madam Mayor. He took the crate and-"

The raichu rose into the air in a bubble of purple light and his breath rushed out of his lungs as his back struck the wall.

"You lost Download Database?!" she roared.

The orange rodent pokemon stuttered as he struggled to release himself from her psychic attack.

"Is it connected to the network?!" she demanded.

He nodded stiffly.

"So you're telling me," she began slowly, "that my top secret project is in that mawile's sticky paws?!"

The purple bubble vanished and the raichu crumpled to the floor. He rubbed at his neck and diverted his eyes to the wall, falling briefly on the fascinated chingling.

Socket's lips pursed together as her mind ran over every worst case scenario. Whatever pokemon ended up with the living computer in their paws would realise soon enough that it lacked every essence that made it an individual being.

"What of the pachirisu's memories?" she asked.

"We removed them," he croaked. "Everything. Saved to a disk, just like you asked."

"Destroy it."

Yobi's eyes widened and he stared at her, aghast. "But… that's murder."

Socket clicked her tongue and glanced away. "Of course it is."

"Why do you want it destroyed?"

"In case it's retrieved! I want that computer in complete working order as designed, at least until we can find a more… convenient tool." She paused. "Which I am now all the more anxious to do after this little setback."

"All right." Yobi rubbed at his neck again and cleared his throat. "We could break it up? Hide it all. That way, her personality survives and-"

"If you think that will work, then do that."

"Sure thing."

"I also want you to limit what information she has access to," she said. "I don't want that mawile selling on confidential information."

Yobi scratched his ears and coughed. "I don't… that might not-"

"Don't let me down, Yobi." Her voice was laced with ice that chilled him so much his fur stood on end. "Now retrieve that computer. And make it quick. I've already lost valuable time."

The raichu rose to his feet and bolted out of the room, his large paws sliding over the loose rug as he scrambled into the corridor.

Socket turned to face the chingling and he returned her look with a wide smile.

"Cut that out, Tweak," she said.

The little bell-like pokemon laughed, an odd tinkle that filled her office and made her fur bristle.

"I want new posters printing, and an update on the wanted list," she said. "Increase Hunter's bounty up to forty thousand credits and have the reward apply in System Sky. That mawile will be behind bars before weekend."

She tucked her paws behind her back and moved over to the window. Tweak's hyper jingling resounded off the walls, but once again she tuned it out, keeping her eyes on the sky.

Wildcard Gamma… that ship would be stripped down for parts. Slowly. And she was going to enjoy every second of it.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 6

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Six

Macro's sleep had been oddly dreamless, and as he woke up it took a moment or two for him to actually remember getting to his room.

That pachirisu…

Faint light penetrated the curtain and he kicked the sheets off and snatched up his small, pocket computer. Nine AM. He'd slept the whole night away.

Muttering under his breath, he strutted over to the door while fastening his belt back around his waist. Somehow, he'd managed to fall asleep with his goggles on and they pressed uncomfortably against his horn. He shunted them about until they felt a lot more natural and tripped into the cockpit.

"Careful, Cap'n." Anchor lifted the wooden panel and propped it against the wall beside the door. "Still trying to get things straight in here."

"Where is she?" Macro scanned the small room until he spotted Download Database huddled inside the splintered box.

"She's been in there all night," Anchor explained. "Shut herself down shortly after you went to bed."

"Well… about twenty minutes after," added Matrix. "Apparently she's programmed to obey orders."

Macro reached behind the small squirrel pokemon's neck and flicked the power switch. Her antenna flashed blue and she looked up groggily.

"Rise and shine, sweetheart," he scoffed.

She blinked up at him and rubbed a paw across her eyes. "Are you Socket?"

Despite looking tired, her voice came out with as much energy as it had the night before.

"No, I'm not Socket," he spat. "And you're gonna answer me some questions."

"The first pokemon I see is meant-"

"Yeh, I know. You're meant to see Socket. Whatever." He crouched down beside her and frowned into her brown eyes. "Now, tell me. Why did they remove your identity? What were you made for?"

"I can't divulge that information without a password."

"Yeh I know. Let's see." He scratched his head thoughtfully. "How about 'password'?"

"You're meant to start it with 'the password is'," she told him.

He sighed and ran his paws over his face. Never simple.

"Fine," he said. "The password is 'password'."

"Incorrect."

"The password is 'Socket'."

"Incorrect."

"The password is 'number one'?"

"Incorrect."

Macro stood up and threw his paws in the air. "The password is 'Socket rules'?!"

"Incorrect."

He roared and tugged at the long fur on his head. "This is impossible!" He rounded on the ribombee. "How are your hacking skills?"

"Virtually non existent," answered Matrix. "Why?"

"Because I want to know why this pachirisu was killed and had a computer installed into her brain!"

"Oh, I have not been killed," said Download Database. "All my identity and memories have been removed safely and are stored in an undisclosed location."

Macro stared at her, dumbfounded. "You don't even care, do you?"

"Care?"

"Yes, care." Macro folded his arms and inclined his head on one side. "What else did they do? Remove all your emotions as well? You're just some… emotionless, empty, pathetic husk used as a stupid computer?"

Her nose crinkled. "I understand your words are intended to hurt."

"Yeh." A small smirk spread across his face. "Feel anything?"

"I'd have to see my facial expression to discern that." She looked around the wooden crate. "Does anyone have a mirror?"

"All right, I've had enough," said Macro. "I'm going to get some lunch. Anchor, refuel. Matrix." He pointed a claw at the pachirisu. "Watch her."

"You want me to watch her?" Matrix glanced from Download Database to Macro and back.

"It's either that or I leave her with Anchor and you can go and be fawned over by your fangirls."

"Fangirls. That word is new to me," said Download Database. "Deciphering… A formerly derogatory term now widely accepted in fandom communities. Used to describe a girl who acts in an excitable fashion when engaging in, talking about or nearby their obsession. Often enjoy shippings and writing fanfiction."

The three space pirates were quiet as they stared, blinking, at the pachirisu.

"Wait," said Matrix. "You think they write stories about me?" He stared down at his paws then shrugged. "I hope I'm still cool."

Macro blinked a few times then waved the pokemon away as he marched from the room. "I'll be back after breakfast."

Cookie poked his head out of the kitchen door as he passed. "I already made us breakfast."

"Sorry, I need some air. And I need to find someone." Macro gave the chocolate-scented slurpuff a nod. "Save me the leftovers for lunch or something."

Cookie gave him a weak smile. "I'll try but I can't promise anything."

Pulse City was as busy as it always was, although the neon signs weren't as dazzling in daylight. Smells of alcohol were replaced by baking. Bread, sweets and meat filled the air and the store fronts were teaming with hungry pokemon who were ready to begin their day.

Macro's destination was the Moonlight Lounge. Their bar grub was one of the best in Pulse City and they made a killer nutpea and occa

burger.

As he strolled through the lounge, cheerful expressions turned to ones of hunger when eyes fell on him. The tyranitar he'd seen the day before sat by his usual table and sipped at his drink. The other two pokemon who'd accompanied him were no longer present, but it didn't change the expression of self-confidence behind the monstrous pokemon's eyes.

Macro shrugged it off and climbed onto a bar stool where he waved down the mienshao. The fighting pokemon gave him a nod of acknowledgment and continued serving his current customer.

"Good morning, Macro." Worm's familiar voice drew his attention.

The sewaddle sat on the bar, holding a small shot glass in a stubby paw. He gave Macro a sleepy smile and took a swig of his drink.

"Morning, Worm," Macro replied. "Not at your stall today?"

"Day off." The caterpillar pokemon dropped his empty glass onto the counter and lowered his voice. "I dunno if you've noticed, but there's been a little change that concerns you. A lot." He paused. "A big change, actually."

"Oh?" Macro looked around at the lounge again, noting the glares fired his way.

"It don't concern us pirates though, so I wouldn't worry your little self," Worm went on. "But that bounty on your head, it's gone up."

Macro stared down at him and raised an eyebrow. "By how much?"

"Double."

"Double?!"

Macro covered his mouth and looked around again. Most of the space pirates were still watching him, but it became clearer what it

was. It was jealousy and anger. The higher the bounty the more revered the space pirate. Well… revered was a funny way of putting it. It meant competition. A pirate with a higher tag was doing better than those with a lower one, and despite how much was on their head, a pirate could never turn another one in. Every single one was wanted, whether they had a poster saying so or not. If they turned one in, they'd only be handing themselves over in the process. That meant certain death. Every one who was turned over found themselves on death's row, that's why 'dead or alive' applied. It was the only instance a pokemon was allowed to kill another, and the lower price for a dead pirate was meant to deter that and leave it to the officials. The high marks sparked jealousy and anger because it was still coveted, and the only way to get it would be to hire a mercenary and split the cost in a way that often went against the pirate's favor.

Worm laughed and shook his head. "What did you do to cheese Socket off so much that she cranked up your bounty?"

"Can't say," said Macro.

He watched as the mienshao moved along to serve a pokemon who'd arrived after him. Great, even the bar tender was jealous of him. He leant his head on his paw and wondered if it was worth just going back to his ship and eating some of Cookie's pancakes.

"Well, it must have been pretty bad," said Worm. "I mean, twenty thousand was pretty high as it was. To increase it that much… wowzers, Macro. Even turning you in dead would rack up a hefty price!"

The sewaddle chuckled and waved his tail for the mienshao.

"Well, if it isn't the most wanted pirate in System." Two hairy arms landed on the bar beside him and Macro looked up into the grinning face of a female zigzagoon. "Good morning, Hunter."

Macro's brow furrowed and he pushed himself back from the bar. "I think I'll have breakfast on my ship, Worm. See you around."

"Hang on, mister." Surge grabbed his arm and pulled him back into his seat. "I haven't bought you a drink."

"I don't want a drink," he answered flatly.

"Don't worry, I'm not gonna spore it. Sit down."

Macro sighed and fell back into his seat. "What do you want?"

"I want to know what you did to land yourself on Socket's red list." She helped herself to a bowl of dried nutpea berries and nudged the bowl towards him.

Macro stared up at her, his mouth slightly ajar. Red list wasn't a term pokemon commonly used. It wasn't necessarily known outside of hacker circles, and whether or not someone was on that list was definitely not made public. He frowned.

"What makes you think I'm on her red list?" he asked. "Are you just assuming?"

She chuckled and popped a nutpea into her mouth. "I have my ways."

"Hacker, hey?" He laughed and turned so he was comfortable in his seat. "Maybe you can buy me that drink."

"Maybe you can buy me one, too!" Worm waved his empty shot glass.

"Interested now, huh?" Surge smirked and locked her light brown eyes onto Macro's. "If you want to know more, I should tell you I'm not comfortable talking about sensitive matters in such… crowded… situations."

Macro glanced around at the bar again. He really didn't like where this was going, but if he wanted answers he really needed to use her hacking skills, or find another hacker. With the looks he was getting and all the pricked ears around him, finding another complying hacker wouldn't be easy. He turned back to the zigzagoon and lowered his voice enough that even Worm couldn't hear him.

"If I did want to hire you to do some hacking," he said, "how much would it cost?"

"Depends," she said. "But I think a date should suffice."

Macro suppressed a sigh and leant his head on one paw. "A date?"

"Yes. You know. A quiet restaurant where we can talk things over, flirt a bit, and you pay."

So things had taken a turn from being bought a drink to having to pay for a meal. The amount of fuel Wildcard Gamma used was hardly trivial, or cheap, and they'd burnt through a full tank in less than twenty four hours. Could he even justify a meal with this sly zigzagoon? He let out that sigh and brought up his account balance on his optical display. Just over thirty thousand credits, not excluding his crew's wages.

"All right," he said. "One date. And I choose."

"Remember, it has to be quiet, or I tell you nothing." She finished with a smirk.

Macro flashed his canines. "I'm not taking you back to my ship."

"I'm not suggesting that. But I hear Moonlight Lounge has some private booths."

His heart sank. They were hardly cheap, but he really needed a hacker if he was going to get any answers out of that pachirisu. And

if he shelled out for a booth he could still get his burger. Win, win. At a price…

"Fine." He slid off his stool and kicked it aside. "Come with me."

"Oh! Oh!" Worm wriggled over the bar towards him. "Can I join you?"

"No," said Macro. "I don't really need a third wheel."

"Dang." The sewaddle sank onto his stomach. "Gets pretty lonely here."

Macro turned his back on him and slipped past Surge, whipping his paw out of her reach as she tried to grab it. He stayed ahead of her as he made his way around to Moonlight Lounge's restaurant. A scrafty wearing a red and white waiter's uniform leant against the entrance and his eyes narrowed into a leer when he spotted Macro.

"I'd like to book a booth," Macro told him.

"Fourty thousand credits," the scrafty replied.

Macro sneered and the fighting pokemon raised his paws and laughed.

"I'm kidding!" the waiter said. "It's two thousand for a booth plus a thirty percent tip on all dishes and drinks."

"I'll make it fifty percent if you stay away after you've delivered our meals," said Macro.

"Deal."

The scrafty grabbed two menu tablets and led them across the restaurant. The red and white theme continued on with checkered floor tiles and red wooden frames around the individual booths, each with their own door. They all had windows, but Macro understood they were meant to be sound proof. Pirates often booked them out to

make deals they didn't want prying ears to overhear. It didn't stop lip-readers trying, however.

They stopped by a booth two down from the back of the restaurant. The waiter opened the door and let them inside before whipping out his notepad.

"Drinks?" he asked.

"Watmel juice," Macro replied.

The scrafty snorted but he didn't look up from his pad. "It's customary to let the lady order first, but I'll ignore that."

Surge laughed and shook her head. "I'll have the same."

"All right." He popped his pad into his uniform pocket. "I'll be back shortly."

After the door closed, she gave Macro a sly smile.

"Not very courteous, are you?" she said.

"I am where it counts," said Macro.

"And a date doesn't count?"

"I'm only here with you because I want information," he said. "I want to know, first, how you found out I'm on the red list."

"I found out this morning," she said. "I saw a new wanted poster demanding double your previous bounty and wanted to know what you'd done to annoy Socket so much. So I poked around her wanted lists."

"So you are a hacker?"

"Yes. It's one of my many talents."

"Many talents, eh?" Macro folded his arms and sank down against the red leather seat. "So you ain't no ordinary pirate?"

"Pirates can have more than one talent," she said. "But if you must know, I'm a mercenary."

Macro's muzzle creased into a frown. "A pirate mercenary?"

The warning laced into his tone didn't phase her in the slightest. "Just a mercenary."

"And you're hanging around Pulse City?" He sat up straight again and jabbed a claw into the table. "If you're a merc, wouldn't you rather be turning me in than demanding I take you on a date?"

"Oh, it's tempting."

"Then what's stopping you?"

The door opened again, revealing the scrafty balancing a tray on one arm. Surge didn't take her eyes off Macro as she accepted her drink. He met her eyes with a steely stare, the pair of them sitting in silence until the scrafty shuffled uncomfortably from the booth.

"A mercenary can take on more than one job," she said. "And you seem rather interested in my hacking skills."

Macro took a sip of his drink as he mulled her words over. He placed the glass back on the white table with a clatter and leant back in his seat.

"You're gonna ask for more than forty K," he said.

She chuckled softly.

"Well, I hate to let you down," he said. "But that's more than my current bank account."

Surge swirled her drink around in her glass, keeping her brown eyes locked onto his violet ones. "You do leap to assumptions, don't you?"

"Well what else do you want?" He picked up the menu tablet and scrolled through it until he found his nutpea and occa burger.

"It depends what you want," she said as she copied him. "I'm guessing you've got yourself into something rather sticky."

"You could say that. Given Socket's reaction, at least. I happened to steal something that was intended to be delivered to her."

"You stole government property." A seductive smirk curled across her lips. "Talk about going too far."

He snorted and set his menu aside. "You have no idea what it is. If you did, it'd make your skin crawl."

"Try me." She met his gaze again and leant back in her seat.

"All right. It's a living computer." He stared back at her blank expression. "Every single ounce of personality has been removed from this poor pokemon and replaced with a computer. In my opinion, that borders on murder."

Surge made a thoughtful noise.

"She even has an antenna sticking out of her head," he went on. "I know cybernetic modifications aren't exactly uncommon in System, but still. What was she planning? That's what I want to know."

"So you want me to poke around the government's confidential project files?"

"Yes. I want to know everything. What this 'Download Database' is supposed to be designed for, why, and what the passwords are to get this 'living computer' to co-operate with me."

"You're not delivering it to Socket, then?"

Macro snorted at her playful smirk. "Not in the slightest. My original plan was to sell it on the black market, but doing that to a living pokemon who hasn't the faintest clue is almost as bad as selling a child into slavery."

There was a pause as the waiter came in carrying their burgers. Once he'd left, Macro cast a glance at the closed door then turned back to Surge, watching as she picked up her fork and stabbed it into a fry.

"So what's your price?" he asked.

"What you're asking me to do is incredibly risky," she said. "Poking around government files could land me on the red list myself."

"So you're not a professional hacker?"

"I never said that. I get hacking requests quite frequently, but it's not a safe job, Macro. One mistake and I could end up with a bounty on my head that rivals yours."

"Hah. That'd take some of the pressure off me."

She grinned and stuck the fry in her mouth.

"So what's your price?" he asked again.

"Forty thousand credits."

"I told you that's more than my bank balance," he growled. "How about twenty thousand? That's what you'd get for turning me in dead."

She nibbled on her fork and gazed up at the ceiling. "How about twenty thousand and you take me on another date?"

Macro sighed and picked up his burger, taking a huge bite. This zigzagoon was on his last thread.

"Besides." She gave him a sly smile. "You've not upheld your side of the bargain for your first request yet. I thought I said this date was meant to have some flirting involved."

She really was on his last thread.

"Listen, Surge. I might be a space pirate, but I'm still a gentlemon."

She scoffed and popped another fry in her mouth.

"Flirting messes with feelings," he said. "Especially when you don't mean it."

A small smile tugged at her lips. "Humor me."

He sighed again and shook his head. "It's a dangerous game you're playing, Surge."

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 7

A/N - Currently working on chapter Twenty Seven today. That's twenty ahead of this chapter. And I am still no where near done XD

Chapter Seven

Shouts and screams came from the ship and Macro readied his laser as he dashed into the cockpit. He released it back into its holster and shook his head at the two pokemon rolling on the floor.

"Please release me," Download Database said, rather too calmly. "I must shut down and wipe my short term memory."

"No!" Matrix half-growled. "It's too creepy!"

"What are you two doing?" Macro leant against the door frame and folded his arms.

Both pokemon looked up at him and Matrix sat back, revealing that the pachirisu had her arms bound to her sides with the jack lead she'd been boxed with.

"I'm stopping her shutting down again," Matrix explained. "It weirds me out seeing a living pokemon like that."

"Correction," said Download Database. "I'm a living computer. Shutting down is a necessity to conserve power and organise data."

Macro looked down at her. "So you admit you're not a living pokemon? You have, in fact, been killed?"

"No, the pokemon I used to be has not been killed. I am merely borrowing her body."

"It's still savage."

"I'm afraid I do not understand." She wriggled until she was sat upright and fixed him with emotionless, brown eyes. "Please release me. I must shut down and wipe as much memory as possible. I will sadly remain with… forty six minutes of useless data. This unfortunately cannot be rectified without the right command."

"Too late for you then, isn't it?" Macro stifled a laugh. "No. You can stay tied up. There's no point in shutting you down."

"But I must clear my memory as Socket absolutely must be the first pokemon I see."

"Again, it's too late." He frowned. "Why must she be the first one? Can you tell me that, at least?"

"It's an imprint function. The first pokemon I see is the pokemon I serve and have devoted loyalty to. At the moment, that pokemon is you."

"Oh!" His eyes widened and he rubbed at his chin. "So I could tell you to do anything then? Absolutely anything?"

"Yes, and I would have to obey."

"That's convenient." He paused and a smirk tugged at his lips. "Stay switched on."

She blinked. Twice. Then gave a polite nod.

"And stop this Socket nonsense," he added. "Because there's no way I'm taking you to her."

"You're not?"

"No. With the amount she increased my price by, she's clearly up to something. You're no mere toy to her." He frowned at her blank expression. "Understood? You cut it out, and I'll untie you."

She nodded again and stared at the floor.

Macro moved over to her and tugged the cable free. She flexed her arms and rose to her feet while Matrix watched warily from the navigation desk.

"So she's not gonna shut down?" he asked.

"No," said Macro. "Not if she's true to her word."

"I am programmed to obey," she said.

Macro looked up at Matrix then stood. "There you go. She won't freak you out any more. Happy?"

Matrix nodded slowly and twirled one of his antenna in his paw.

"I do, however, require sleep," she said. "But that is a different thing entirely. Something this living body requires."

"Wait a minute… Does that mean we have to feed you, too?" Macro asked.

"Yes."

"Huh." He scratched at his ear and tutted. "I should have thought of that before I ordered that sundae."

"Did someone say sundae?!" Cookie trotted into the cockpit and licked his lips.

"Good timing." Macro nodded over his shoulder at the pachirisu. "One more mouth to feed. Think you can handle that?"

"Ooh!" Cookie eyed her curiously. "I might have to triple my recipes."

"For one more pokemon?" Macro raised an eyebrow. "She's not even that big!"

"Yeh." Cookie rubbed the back of his head. "Hmm… double then?"

Macro waved a paw in dismissal. "You work it out. I'm gonna have a little nap." He rubbed at his chest as he strode from the cockpit. "I'm starting to get some epic heart burn."

"Story of my life." Cookie trotted back into the kitchen, grabbing his apron from the door as he passed.

Macro continued down the corridor past the washroom until he reached the sleeping quarters. Three doors spanned it on either side, and the end one on the left was his, right by the loot room. He eyed the other rooms reminding himself that two of them were free. He'd have to assign one to Download Database, unless she was happy enough sleeping in a wooden crate.

He pushed his room open and threw himself onto his back on his bed. The sheets were still bunched up from the previous night and pressed into his lower spine. He shuffled until he'd managed to move them from underneath him and kicked them right to the end of the bed. He then slipped his belt off and placed it carefully on his night stand. One day, he'd end up forgetting to put one of his lasers back into safety and blow a nice hole in his mattress…

He reached into his pouch and pulled out his pocket computer, staring at the clock ticking seconds by on its flat screen. It hadn't taken long for Surge to pull his number out of him. She had needed it, after all. He wondered how long it would take her to get the information he needed, then he'd block all her future calls if need be. He let his arm flop over the edge of the bed, keeping a firm hold on the computer. Within seconds he was staring at it again, pawing through the various useless apps he'd installed over the years.

A soft knock at the door snapped him out of his daze and he raised his head to look at it.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Download Database." She pushed the door open before he could tell her to go away. "Matrix has made something clear to me. You

owe me an apology."

His brow knit together and he pushed himself up so he was sitting. "For what?"

"For offending me," she explained. "He informed me that is what I was feeling after you called me an 'emotionless, empty, pathetic husk' and 'stupid computer'."

His jaw fell open and hung there. All he could do was stare at her. Was she serious?

"Well?" She inclined her head on one side. "Are you going to apologise?"

Looking into her emotionless, empty eyes unnerved him. No. He wasn't sorry. Everything he'd said was true. There was nothing… nothing… inside this pachirisu except empty data and an ability to speak. She could do the exact same thing as a computer tablet's voice command and helper feature. The only difference here was it was using the body of a living being.

He flopped back onto his bed and went back to scrolling through his computer apps. "I've got nothing to apologise for. I meant every word."

"So I'm pathetic and stupid?"

He grimaced. Maybe not every word.

"I understand." She turned from the door then faltered. "By the way. You said you were going to have a nap. You lied."

He turned his head slightly to look at her. Her back was turned but she had one eye fixed on him over her shoulder.

"You're rude and a liar," she said.

He snorted and blankly thumbed over his tablet screen. "And you're programmed to obey me."

"Yes. I am programmed to obey. Nevertheless, Matrix told me to make my feelings known. I've done that. Have a nice nap."

The door clicked shut, rather too politely. He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. 'Weird' didn't even begin to describe it. He could totally understand where Matrix was coming from. Everything about that 'pachirisu' was wrong. Was there anything he could do to train this computer to behave like an actual pokemon? Or was he stuck with data strolling around his ship inside some hapless pachirisu's body? It wasn't like she'd asked to be put inside there. It wasn't her fault the pokemon had had her identity stripped away. He closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. His chest still hurt. Maybe he was ice cream intolerant? He rolled onto his left, facing the wall, and let his computer drop to his pillow. Maybe a good nap would clear his head?

…

Singing. Who was singing?

Macro rubbed his eyes and pushed himself up onto his elbow, trying to work out where on earth that music was coming from. His pillow was lit up like a torch. He reached down to block it out, but instead his paw found his computer tablet and he snatched it back, noting the name on the screen.

Surge.

It all came barreling back down on him. Breakfast. Socket. Download Database.

He grabbed his phone and croaked a 'Hello' into it.

"Wow, you sound wonderful," came Surge's voice, rather too heavy on the sarcasm.

He cleared his throat and adjusted his pillow so he could sit back against the wall.

"You just woke me," he said.

"It's one in the afternoon."

If he'd thought to switch it to camera mode, she'd have seen him shrug.

"Anyway," she said. "I got the information you need."

"That was fast," he said.

"I take pride in my work. I don't leave my clients waiting around for too long." He thought he heard her smile. "Unless they've wriggled into my bad books."

"I guess I should count myself as one of the lucky ones?" He paused and rubbed at his scar. He couldn't deny he was rather nervous. "So what have you got for me?"

"It turns out you were right," she said. "Socket is up to something, and stealing that living computer may have been the best thing for System as a whole."

"What?" He laughed. "You trying to tell me I've saved the world?"

"No. Not yet." There was a small pause and he heard her take in a sharp breath. "Download Database, as the computer is called, is part of a larger network called BackDoor."

"Huh. Is that being sent over the city antennas?"

"No. BackDoor is not entirely different from the living computer, except it has a personality. Of sorts, anyway. It's completely artificial. Download Database isn't the only computer linked to the network, either. It's filled with creatures that aren't biological. She's the only

biological component, designed merely to fit in with pokemon kind without drawing attention to Socket."

"So what is this BackDoor doing exactly?"

"It's looking for dimensional gateways."

In the silence that followed, Macro found himself wondering if he was actually still asleep and the conversation wasn't even happening. He glanced around at his room. Everything felt strange, dreamlike. No… eerie. Like something was very wrong and he was about to wake up at any moment after a rather unpleasant nightmare.

"Macro?"

Surge's voice snapped him back to his computer and he took in a shaky breath.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "You went quiet."

"I… I'm not sure."

"I know this is hard to take in. I've read over this information three times to make sure I'm reading it right. You know how murder is illegal in System?"

"Yes, I'm quite clear on that."

"Well, they've skirted around it with Download Database. Every single scrap of her personality and memories, everything that makes her who she is from her likes and dislikes to her fears and dreams, has been downloaded from her brain and stored on a disk. But after she fell into your paws, they've been broken up and placed onto five different disks and scattered throughout System to make it harder for whoever ends up with her to obtain them."

"So her personality is retrievable?"

"It is, but you're gonna have a hard time getting them. Each one is in a different government facility and those are heavily guarded. If you try to get them back then you clearly have a death wish."

"Does it say where they are?"

"I have a list. I'll send it to you along with the list of commands you wanted."

"You… you said something about dimensions?" His voice wavered again. Part of him was deeply uncertain he'd even heard her right.

"Yes, I did. What I told you about the living computer and murder law-dodging is completely relevant to that. She's a prototype." She paused and he heard her scratch her head, or ear, or face. "Macro, you've heard of humans?"

"I have. They're fictitious. Make up part of System's mythology."

"Well, Socket believes they exist." She paused again. "That's what BackDoor is trying to find. They're scouting out dimensional gates and opening them. Not just to other worlds, but to other time lines, and it looks like they've had some success. They managed to open a gate that showed them the same room they stood in thirty minutes prior to the test."

He actually pinched himself. It hurt. Could you feel pain in dreams? He really wanted to wake up.

"Macro, this is huge! If they're doing this, then you're already in too deep. I feel I've made a massive mistake in telling you all this."

"No… no, you've not." His voice really wavered.

"You don't sound well."

"It's just heart burn." It wasn't heart burn at all. He felt faint and the room was beginning to spin. "Look… send me the locations for her memories."

"You're still going after them?"

"I have an empty husk of a pachirisu walking around my ship, Surge. Every ounce of her personality has been stolen from her and I'm going to do everything I can to steal them back."

She sighed audibly. "All right. But promise me that's all you'll do."

He bit his lip so hard it hurt. Did she honestly think he was going to interfere in whatever Socket was doing? It was bonkers. It couldn't be real. Humans didn't exist. They never had, there was no proof of that. Zero proof. Allegedly they had, but then they'd all miraculously gone back home from the same dimensional tear they'd been dragged through. It was absolute tauros poop.

"Macro?"

"Did you find out exactly why she wants to find humans?" he asked.

"I didn't delve that deeply," said Surge. "To be honest, I got scared. All I know is she wants to turn them into computers like the pachirisu, but what purpose they serve is a mystery to me. I don't think I even want to know. The passwords for Download Database should allow you to find all that out if you're desperate to know. She's got a computer in her brain, after all."

Macro ran a paw over his face and let out a long sigh. What was Socket up to? One thing was for certain. There was no way she was getting her paws on Download Database.

"I'm getting her memories back," he said. "Then I'm done with this nonsense. Humans do not, and have not ever, existed in System. If what you've told me is even remotely true, Socket is clearly insane. You've seen what she's done to this pachirisu, or read it at least. You have to agree?"

She made a 'hmm' and rapped her claws on what sounded like a desk or table. "I can't say I disagree with you. Anyway. Now I've

done all this, can we make another date?"

"Send me the information first, then we'll talk." He hung up and sank down against the wall.

His chest felt strange, like someone had fastened an elastic band around it. If he'd still been wearing his belt he would have torn it off in hopes it would alleviate it. Anxiety? Fear? Whatever it was, he didn't like it. Usually a bit of a shock gave him a buzz to keep fighting.

His computer chirruped at him and he stared down at Surge's name again. This time it was an email. He opened the attachment with a growing sense of dread.

It wasn't a dream. The whole bonkers, convoluted, dangerous and deadly plan was one hundred percent real. And he had been dragged right into the thick of it.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 8

Chapter Eight

Macro had read over Socket's plan so many times he'd lost count, and it made less and less sense with each read. He stuffed his computer back into his pouch and fastened it back around his waist as he left his bedroom. Lunch time had long since passed and a quick check of the time told him Cookie would have dinner ready soon.

Three different voices came from the cockpit, including the flat, lifeless voice of Download Database. Macro reminded himself of the commands Surge had sent him, many of which were engraved in his mind after his obsessive reading. Some were completely useless to him, such as the ones to connect her to BackDoor or the other individual components that made up the artificial mob scouring System's furthest most remote corners.

Amongst the list of commands was the password that would force her to tell him why she was created, and it was the first one that sprung to mind as soon as he spotted her leaning against the wooden crate, her blank eyes fixed on Anchor as he told her what each of the controls on the dashboard did.

"The password is 'back door'." Macro's voice drew all three pairs of eyes towards him.

"That is correct." Download Database turned so she was fully facing him. "What do you want to know?"

"How did you get that information, Cap'n?" Anchor asked.

"I hired a hacker." Macro turned back to Download Database, but he could see Anchor's confused and questioning look out of the corner of his eye. "Don't worry yourself, Anchor. You'll still get paid. Now, tell

me, Download Databse. Why were you created?" He knew. He knew exactly why, but some part of him hoped deeply that Surge was pulling his leg.

The pachirisu continued to face him, but she wasn't seeing him. Her eyes had gone elsewhere, searching through the endless amounts of information stored inside her head.

"Download Database was created as an information receiver for the project BackDoor. It is meant to accompany Socket to keep her up to date on progress as dimensional gateways are discovered and opened across System."

Drat. Surge had been right.

His head felt fuzzy and he let it flop into his paw. Matrix and Anchor sat on his peripheral vision, their mouths agape.

"Dimensional gateways?" Matrix asked, rather too confidently.

"Is this pachirisu trolling you?" Anchor asked. "Did you use the wrong password or something?"

"No." Macro rubbed at his temples. "What she's said is true. Like I said, I hired someone to find out for me, and I just wanted to check everything she'd told me was fact."

"Of course it's true," said Download Database. "I am programmed not to lie."

"Then if Socket is doing this," said Matrix, "what does it mean for System?"

"She's looking for humans," said Macro.

Anchor roared with laughter. "Humans don't exist!"

"I'm aware of that," Macro scoffed. "This pachirisu is apparently a prototype. Socket wants to make more of them, but using pokemon

isn't ethical, or efficient, because in order to loop around 'murder', they have to keep their personalities alive. All of hers are stored on disks."

"That's barbaric," said Anchor.

"It is, but at least she can get them back." Macro folded his arms and leant back against the door frame. "Not exactly efficient since it could ruin Socket's plans. If they were destroyed, she wouldn't be able to, and the risk of losing her would be removed."

"And humans aren't pokemon." Matrix wound his antenna in his paw. "So destroying their personalities doesn't count as murder, as our laws wouldn't apply to them."

"Exactly."

"So let me get this straight." Anchor scratched the base of his mohawk. "Socket honestly thinks humans exist somewhere, and is tearing open dimensional gates - which, believe me, I think is a load of guano - in an attempt to find something that allows her to bypass our laws?"

"Yup."

"What do you think?" Anchor turned his seat to face him. "You don't believe in humans, do you?"

"Of course not! It's all legends and myths."

"Incorrect." Download Database looked at each of them in turn. "My database contains facts on human existence and activity in System."

"Facts?" Macro sneered. "Where did you get these 'facts'?"

"All historical documentation held within System," she said. "I can even get online to cross reference if desired, but the facts are there."

"Historical documentation…" Macro chuckled and scratched his scar. "You mean books? That's no proof, sweetheart. There's no physical evidence of humans ever existing in System. No fossils, no photographs. Nothing."

"All humans were transformed into pokemon," she explained. "Then they were all sent back to their own world through the Fracture that engulfed Seed City. Only one remained in System at the time. He could switch back and forth between a talonflame and human at will."

"Yeh? Then where is the physical proof?"

"There is none. It is believed if he passed away, he did so in the form of a talonflame."

"Exactly." Macro kicked himself back from the wall and turned towards the kitchen. "Hatchling stories. Legends and myths."

"Incorrect. My sources count it as valid information."

"Okay, let's say humans did exist." His words were laced with a growl. "Why does she want them, exactly?"

"To expand BackDoor's reach."

"And what is BackDoor doing? Because I don't imagine this all comes to an end once humans are found."

"I cannot answer that," she said. "That information is not accessible to me."

Macro blinked. Well, that was convenient. A nice little cover up for Socket should Download Database fall into the wrong paws.

"So she doesn't even give you a reason for stealing your personality," he said flatly. "She did all this to you… and doesn't even bother to give you access to her reasoning?"

"My existence is to serve and to obtain information from BackDoor on demand."

"Face facts, pachirisu!" He rounded on her, lowering his nose to hers. "Socket had your personality wrenched out on the basis of chasing down some legend because she wants to bypass her own stinking laws!"

She didn't even step back or blink, returning his stare with a blank, chocolate brown one that almost chilled him.

"Why don't you feel anything?!" he roared. "You're in a stolen body yet you just don't care!"

"You're angry. That's detrimental to your own wellbeing." The pachirisu diverted her gaze to the doorway and her eyes grew distant. "Searching for calming suggestions."

Macro threw his arms in the air and marched from the room. "Forget it! I'm gonna get some dinner. I'll be in the kitchen if anyone needs me."

"That is a good idea," said Download Database. "The slow burning nutrients injected into me for transportation are running low. I should eat also."

Macro felt his fur bristle down his back. He refrained from looking back as the pachirisu's light, heavily-furred footsteps followed him across the corridor to the large kitchen.

Cookie waddled from an open cupboard to the stove and froze, staring at Macro over his shoulder. His round face lit up and his tongue poked out between his teeth.

"I saved you some breakfast and lunch and put the two together!"

"Fantastic." Macro fell into a seat and flinched as Download Database climbed into Matrix's usual seat opposite him. "What is it?"

"Chocolate chip pancakes and fruit coolie with payapa and tanga berry sandwiches." The slurpuff dropped a plate before him and stood back with a huge smile.

Macro's heart soared and he grabbed his knife and fork to dig in.

"This is what you eat?" Download Database's voice froze him and he glanced up at her with a frown. "This is not a healthy balanced meal. Pancakes and coolie are high in sugar and the berries have been fried to within an inch of their life."

"So?" Macro growled.

"You are meant to have a good balance of vitamins and carbohydrates for the body to function at optimal efficiency. Fresh berries are much healthier than those that are cooked. Even stewed berries are healthier than fried. If you want to cook them first, steaming is the best method as it locks in more vitamins. Throw it away. I shall make you a healthy meal."

She rose to her feet and moved over to the stove where she promptly moved Cookie's steaming pan of stewing berries and sugar.

"Wait!" Cookie waddled over to her with his paws outstretched. "Leave it alone! This is my kitchen!"

She stared down at him over the steaming pan. "Your cooking skills are inefficient. Allow me to show you."

Cookie stamped his foot and his eyes filled with tears. "But I love cooking! I'm a professional chef!"

"You are young."

"You can be a professional at fourteen!"

"Professionals make more than just sweets."

Macro kept one eye on the squabbling pokemon as he stuffed a forkful of pancakes into his mouth. A small smile played at his lips and he lifted his plate to head back into the cockpit, leaving their bickering voices behind. At least she'd be entertained and out of his way for a while.

…

Socket waited patiently as the dialing tone rang out from her holographic computer screen. After the third ring, the familiar face of a delphox appeared on screen - or what one would assume was a delphox amongst the thick cloud of smoke that surrounded most of his features.

"Good afternoon, Detective Tracer," she said.

"What is it, Mayor Socket?" he asked, somewhat boredly.

"I have a favor to ask of you," she said. "It's too confidential to go into details, but I am under the impression you have a mercenary working for you?"

"Yes, I do." He blew out a stream of yet more smoke and flicked the remains of his cigar off the screen. "It's the easiest way to track down space pirates."

"Quite the chameleon, I understand?"

"She gets the job done." He paused as he lit up another cigar. "Is this favor from me or her?"

"I would like her contact details," said Socket. "I think a mercenary is exactly what I need right now."

"Given recent developments, I'm guessing you want Hunter round up quickly?"

"You catch on quick."

"I'm not exactly one to sniff at forty K, Madam Mayor."

She pursed her red lips together and rested her chin on her steepled fingers. "Can you do this favor for me, or not?"

"If you're taking my merc off me to round him up, I want a cut of the price," he said. "Surge and I have a deal. Every bounty she earns from rounding up pirates gets split forty/sixty. She gets the bigger cut, otherwise she walks."

"Tell me, Mister Fox. Why would she stay working with you if she could get one hundred percent?"

"You see, there's a little thing called 'team work'." Tracer blew out another cloud of smoke that completely obscured everything except the tips of his ears. "She isn't the only one rounding up pirates. We all get a cut, and she gets the bigger one."

"Very well. Will you send her my way?" Her voice was calm, but her eyes remained hard.

The delphox wafted some of the smoke away to clear the screen and leant back in his seat, keeping his amber eyes on her.

"Do I get a cut?" he asked.

"That is up to… Surge, is it?"

He nodded.

"Well. It's not up to me," she finished.

He was silent for a moment, not taking his eyes off her.

"I don't really have a choice, do I?" he asked.

Socket shook her head slowly.

"Very well," he said. "I'll send you her contact details."

The video cut out, and almost immediately the program beeped, bringing up a string of numbers followed by the name 'Surge'. As she keyed them in, she cast a quick glance over her shoulder at the chingling.

"How are you getting on there, Tweak?" she asked.

"Oh, I think I'm nearly done!" His cheerful voice rang off the walls. "Every bit of sensitive information concerning BackDoor is now blocked from Download Database's access."

"Good. Any wiser on who our little hacker was?" She stared at the string of numbers and tapped her claws on her desk.

Tweak chuckled, his bell grating in his throat. "Whoever it was did a good job, but they're not better than me. I've traced it right back to their phone number. Want me to read it out to you?"

Socket's lips pulled up into a smirk. "Definitely."

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 9

Chapter Nine

Macro leant on the back of Matrix's chair, holding his computer so both the ribombee and Anchor could see it. His claw slid over the flat screen, scrolling through the tidy list of text.

"This is every location where they're storing Download Database's memories," he told them. "In detail, down to what floor the disks are on. We can expect each one to be heavily guarded."

"Five locations?" Anchor took the tiny computer in his large pink paw. "So there's five disks?"

"Yup." Macro straightened and folded his arms. "If we're gonna restore her, then we need to hunt them down."

"One of them is in Central Meta City," said Matrix. "Which one do you want to go to first?"

"The closest."

A soft shuffle behind them drew his attention over his shoulder. Whatever Anchor had said didn't register in his mind. Download Database appeared in the room, pausing beside her wooden crate, giving the three space pirates a quick glance. No curiosity. No pausing to ask what they were doing. She just… existed.

"Cap'n?"

He looked up into the granbull's confused face. "Huh?"

"I said the nearest is Scanner City," said Anchor. "Not even a six hour flight from here."

"But it will still get us there in the dead of night," said Matrix. "Around one or two AM."

"That's perfect," said Macro. "There'll be less pokemon on the streets."

"I wouldn't bank on it," said Anchor. "Scanner City is fighting pokemon territory. Those 'mon are party animals."

Matrix's tiny face split into a grin and he stifled a chuckle as he turned back to his navigation desk. His paws swiftly keyed in the co-ordinates.

"I guess it doesn't really matter then." Macro leant back against the ribombee's chair and frowned at the pachirisu. "First thing's first, we're gonna have to give you a name."

"My name is Download Database," she said.

"Not for long." He brought up the commands on his phone and scanned over them. "Let's see. Rename Download Database Zero Zero One."

"Understood," she said. "Awaiting new name."

Macro looked back up at her, meeting those lifeless, chocolate eyes. It felt no different than giving a name to a stuffed animal. What on earth was he going to call her? Download Database was too much of a mouthful and he was growing tired of it. He scratched at his scar and fixed his attention on the wall to his right.

"Let's see," he muttered. "How about… DL?"

An acronym, of sorts. At least it was shorter.

"Rename Download Database as DL?" she asked.

"Yes." He closed the file on his computer and stuffed it back into his pouch. "DL."

"Understood. Download Database Zero Zero One is now known as DL." Her huge eyes closed in a rather long blink and she stared at him for a moment. "You appear calmer. That is good."

He waved her off and climbed into his seat beside Anchor, kicking his feet up onto the dashboard.

"Why DL?" Anchor asked.

"Because I wanted to pick two letters from her codename," Macro answered. "And I didn't like DD."

"Fair enough," Anchor grumbled.

"Prepare us for takeoff, Matrix," said Macro.

"We're leaving?" DL shuffled over to him. "Do you want me to go into standby for the journey?"

"Nah, you're good."

"Then can I at least be of service? I have good navigation abilities."

"We already have a navigation officer," said Macro. "Maybe you could help Cookie in the kitchen? Besides, you might like this trip. We're going to get your memories."

"My memories? But… they're useless junk data. They'll only serve to clutter my databases."

"Yeh, well-"

A beep came from his pouch and he lazily brought up the details on his optical display, stifling a yawn. A message from Surge… another push of the button on his ear piece opened it and he let out a low groan.

'If you're going to repay me with that date, then we'd better go now. I have to leave before sunset, and I've no idea how long I'll be.'

"Delay take off." He leapt from his seat and trotted out of the cockpit.

"Where are you goin'?" Anchor called after him.

"It's business. I'll be back soon, don't worry. DL, I'm leaving Anchor in charge." He grinned at the other pirate and gave him a mock salute over his shoulder.

"I'm afraid helping Cookie is not an option," DL told the granbull. "He threatened to cook me last time."

Anchor sighed and his seat creaked as he leant his weight back into it.

Macro leapt from the exit hatch and almost landed on the zigzagoon. She took a step back and grinned at him, but something was missing. A sparkle? She didn't look right, anyway.

He straightened his back and leant against the blue hull of his ship.

"You wanna go back to Moonlight Lounge?" he asked.

"I was thinking more an outdoor session this time." She linked her arm in his and steered him off the docks. "Crispy Crepes is a nice spot at this time, I hear."

"That sounds like more ice cream," he said. "I think I'm still recovering from my ice cream coma."

"Then what do you suggest?" She fixed him with a small smile.

"Cornn dogs," he said. "Dockside does some good ones. You should try their shuca and babiri berry sauce."

"Well… you're buying."

He grit his teeth together and steered her along the docks towards a stand with a red neon sign that said 'Dockside Dogs'. The plusle and minun brothers moved back and forth behind the counter, serving up

cornn dogs into pre-cut rolls and slapping berry dressings on top of them to satisfy their hungry customers.

Macro narrowly avoided an aggron's large feet and pushed Surge ahead of him into the queue. When he was a hatchling, his mother had always told him a gentlemon puts ladies first, but he'd never really had time for that nonsense to put it into practice. At least he'd not forgotten it.

He leant back against the crowd control rail and cast Surge a sideways glance. Rather than eyeing up the menu she stared out at the vast deep blue outside the dome, her eyes distant as she watched a golden magikarp ship trundle into the docks.

"Something on your mind?" he asked.

"Hmm?" She looked round at him then forced a smile as she stared back out at the sky. "Oh. Not really. I just have a new mission to get to, that's all."

His muzzle crinkled into a frown but he occupied himself with moving forward in the queue. After the slightly overweight gabite, they were next.

"That's why you're in such a rush then?" he asked. "Must be pretty important."

"It's completely confidential, that much I can tell you." She joined his side and nodded up at the menu. "Chople and salac for me, please."

Macro reached into his pouch for his credits and snorted. "That's a weird-ass combination."

"And shuca and babiri isn't?"

"Nope. Babiri makes it super spicy and takes an edge off the bitterness. One of the perks of living with a chef."

He placed their orders and watched as the two small rodents busied themselves in preparing the freshly fried cornn dogs. He found himself wondering what remarks Download Database would come up with if she witnessed the spectacle. She'd probably bristle at the sight of all the grease and the plusle and minun's grimy uniforms.

The minun handed them their orders and wiped his paws on his apron before calling for the next customer.

Macro strolled away towards the dock rail and leant forward on it as he tucked into his cornn dog. They'd gone a little heavy on the babiri and it made his tongue tingle. It tasted like spite. Yet another space pirate who was envious of his hefty price tag.

Surge let out a satisfied sigh and licked sauce from her lips. "You weren't wrong."

Macro grunted. "I can't believe you've never been there. How long have you lived here?"

"I don't live here," she said quietly. "I'm a mercenary. But if you must know…" She shifted so she was facing him. "About a month."

"Let me guess. You lurk about until you spot your target and try to catch them when they leave?"

"Exactly."

He took another bite of his meal, trying to ignore the burning heat that filled his mouth. There was something nagging at him about this zigzagoon. Why be so open with him about being a mercenary? Especially one who targeted space pirates. He stared at his cornn dog, watching as the sauce trickled over the bun and onto his paws. A mercenary who chose a target and tried to catch them when they left Pulse City…

"It was you." He launched the remains of his meal into the nearest trash can, startling a nearby weedle. "It was you who followed us!"

She sighed and leant forwards on the rail.

"You're plannin' on turnin' me in." Despite his blistering rage, he kept his voice low. He folded his arms and sneered. "Is that what all this is? Some kind of trick?"

She shook her head. "It's no trick."

"Then what is it, Surge?"

"I don't know. One minute I'm trying to catch you, the next I'm taking out one of those government ships."

His jaw fell open. Words wanted to form but they died before they could even string sentences in his mind. That torpedo… she'd fired it?

"I… really need to get to this job. At this rate they might not pay me." She pushed herself back from the rail and ran a paw over her ears. "Listen… thanks for the dinner and… date."

Macro stared after her, his mouth agape. Her ragged tail hung limply behind her, trailing over the ground. She'd fired the torpedo. Why on earth would a mercenary hired to round up pirates fire at a government fleet? He ran a paw over his face and trudged back to Wildcard Gamma. Things were just getting more and more confusing and it was giving him a headache.

…

Tracer strolled through the toxic streets of Server City, his paws shoved into his trench coat pockets. Every breath he took was amplified in his own ears by his mask's noisy filters. The breeze caught in his open grey coat and it billowed out behind him, almost catching his small eevee companion. Widget didn't flinch, however. His attention was fixed on their surroundings, keeping an eye open for trouble makers. Server City, like the rest of Meta City's outskirts, was home to the majority of System's poison pokemon. Dark types

also called it home, but they preferred to lurk around Spool City after a feud with Proxy's muk and grimer gangs.

The delphox checked his pocket computer once more, making sure he'd got the address right. This was where Socket wanted him to be, he was certain. He looked up at the squat, grimy buildings and unkempt abandoned office towers and frowned.

"Something wrong?" Widget's voice was muffled by his mask.

"I'm just making sure I've got the address right," Tracer answered.

"Croagunk right?"

"Yes. But they like damp places." Tracer placed his computer back into his pocket and stared up at the high rise building perched between a convenience store and a boarded up unidentifiable shop. "Why would he live in an apartment block?"

Widget shrugged his shoulders which gave a small, mechanical whine. "Lack of options?"

"Well." Tracer reached into his thick tail and pulled out his wooden stick. A small flame ignited at the end as it touched the air. "Let's just hope he's not got backup."

"Oh, I'm prepared for backup."

Widget laughed heartily and took a step back as Tracer powered a psychic blast through his flaming stick. The door flew inward off its hinges and he strolled inside with Widget close behind him.

The apartment block was dingy and stunk of amonia and mildew. Maybe it was damp enough for a croagunk after all?

The low lighting made it difficult to see, and Tracer's flame cast flickering shadows along the heavily graffitied walls. As they climbed the stairs, one of the lights flickered on and off erratically, creating a grating noise as the bulb struggled to stay lit.

"What floor is it?" Widget asked.

"Third." Tracer replied while dodging a suspicious puddle.

As they climbed the stairs to the third floor, something moved on his peripheral vision. He glanced back over his shoulder at a small, green bug pokemon slowly dropping on an invisible thread. A spinarak, likely fallen out of his web while he slept. He kept a cautious eye on the spider pokemon, watching it rotate slowly in the air.

Two of the third floor corridor lights were broken, leaving only the central point lit up. The worn and battered doors, each one coated in spray painted slogans and artwork, made the rooms behind them look abandoned. All except the third one along on his left. Light leaked out from underneath it and he could hear someone moving around inside.

Tracer paused by the door and rapped a paw on it.

"Who's there?!" a voice growled out at him.

"Santa Paws!" shouted Widget.

Tracer raised an eyebrow at the eevee who returned it with what he could assume was a grin since it made his eyes sparkle. The door was thrown open and a croagunk pointed a laser straight at the detective's face.

"Dontcha think I'm too old to be belivin' in Santa Paws?" The amphibian narrowed his eyes and cocked his weapon.

Tracer sighed and readied another psychic blast from his stick, but before he could fire it, Widget launched himself at the croagunk into a full-body take-down. The two pokemon rolled across the floor of his apartment, crushing wrappers and other trash until they hit the far wall.

The delphox kept his stick raised as he followed them into the room. Widget stood above the fallen croagunk, his eyes alight with glee. As usual, the eevee hadn't taken so much as a scratch from the collision. His skeletal modifications had absorbed the shock perfectly.

"Well," said Tracer. "I can count on you to get a job done, can't I?"

He reached into his pocket for his cuffs.

"What's goin' on in 'ere?"

The two detectives looked up at the door, meeting the frown of a scrafty. His red mowhawk-like fin had a green tinge to it and his face was covered with a cheap surgical mask. Its efficiency showed in his labored, rattly breathing. His large eyes went to the croagunk and then flashed with rage. Within two strides he was almost on top of the two detectives.

Tracer flicked his stick round and pulled its hidden trigger. A flash of sparkling pink light fired out of the end of it, lighting up the dingy apartment. The scrafty flew back from him and landed in a crumpled heap in a pile of poffin wrappers.

"Dang it, Tracer," Widget sighed. "Couldn't leave him to me, could you? Had to use your flippin' gun."

The eevee gave his stick a begrudging glance then moved over to the fallen pokemon. His loose trouser-like skin had fallen down around his knees and revealed part of his tail.

"We taking them both in?" Widget asked.

"Socket only wants the croagunk." Tracer snapped his cuffs onto the amphibian's wrists and hoisted him over his shoulder. "Cover me in case any more thugs show up."

"Sure thing!"

Widget trotted from the room and glanced up and down the corridor before making for the stairs. He froze at the bend and frowned.

"Drat."

Tracer paused behind him and stared down at the ocean of spinarak. If that little green bug had been sleeping, it definitely wasn't any more. And its entire family stared up at them from a sea of tiny, black eyes. Towering over the small spiders and flexing its mandibles was an ariados.

Tracer raised his stick and the flame flared. "Get ready to run."

"It's party time!" Widget laughed and threw himself into the air. "Just don't burn my tail, okay?"

The tiny eevee crashed down onto the bug pokemon, the vibrations shaking the stairs. He pounced from bug to bug until he reached the next flight of stairs. Before Tracer could reach him, the ariados lunged at him, her jaws pulled back in a hiss.

"Terribly sorry, ma'am." The delphox unleashed a flamethrower, blowing the arachnid back down the corridor. "But you're interfering with police work."

Tiny feet rapped across the wooden floor as the remaining spinarak gave chase. Threads shot from their mouths and struck the walls where they clung like glue, narrowly missing Tracer's bushy tail. Some of the spinarak used the threads to propel themselves past him and two landed just before him before launching more threads right at his face. He ducked, but one of the string shots caught his wrist and yanked his paw free from the croagunk, sending the unconscious amphibian to the ground.

The spinarak chuckled and threw itself towards him, poison dripping from its jaws. Widget's brown blur struck the bug mid-air and crashed it into the wall, sending chips of plaster raining down onto the floor.

Tracer beat white dust from his coat then scooped up the croagunk.

"That was a narrow escape," he told Widget.

"Sacrifice speed for strength." Widget strolled past him and gave him a quick glance over his shoulder. "It's served me well so far."

Tracer shook his head and followed the eevee from the apartment block. He gave the croagunk a pat on the shoulder then sheathed his stick.

"I'm afraid, young chap, that your hacking days are over."

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 10

A/N - Urk. The amount of typos I found while proofing this was ridiculous XD

Chapter Ten

Scanner City pulsed with industrial dance music that penetrated Wildcard Gamma before they even pulled in to land. Lights filled the streets, dazzling Macro's eyes as he descended on the ladder. Anchor shielded his eyes with a paw and grunted.

"This city could use a dimmer switch!" he said.

"I couldn't agree more," said Macro.

The mawile squinted into the bustling street, noting the various clubs and bars heaving with pokemon to such a degree they spilled outside. His feet touched the ground in an alley and his hip brushed a trash can. He frowned and beat moisture from his fur, quickly checking over the offending item. Clean, unlike the Meta City outskirts. And not home to a trubbish, either.

Anchor landed in a crouch behind him and sniffed the air.

"Stinks of fermented berry juice," he said.

"At least it's not toxic," said Macro.

"May as well be."

Anchor followed him out of the alley into the bustling street. Loud shouts came from one of the bars and a primape threw his overflowing glass at a hawlucha's head. The fighting type bird pokemon ducked, letting the glass shatter against the wall. Alcohol rained down on him and the primape fumed, stomping his large feet

in a tantrum. A machoke burst out laughing, only to be silenced by a hitmonchan's gloved fist.

The rowdy group barely seemed to notice the two space pirates as they passed by, but a pair of pangoro cast them identical leers. Neither made a move, or alerted their drinking companions. Macro glanced them out of the corner of his eye, keeping his paws well away from his lasers. They knew the two fairy types were more than capable of taking them down en-mass.

Macro brought up his optical display, showing an intricate map of Scanner City. Matrix had dropped them off relatively close to the government facility holding DL's first memory disk. What contents it held were a mystery to him, but if it would help her then he wanted to get it. The order she received them in was irrelevant.

The blinking light on his map told him he needed to keep going straight. The facility was in the city square, and was the main focal point of the area. It was where the city's law and order was kept in… well… order.

Another glass exploded against the wall mere inches from him and tiny shards of glass struck his legs and feet. He looked over at a monferno and emboar, the latter crashing his hooves together as his snout creased into a frown.

"Filthy space pirate!" the monkey snarled. "What'cha think yer up to, strollin' around our city?"

Macro sneered. Fire types. Typical. One of the types that resisted their fairy attacks while obliterating him in the process. His left paw found his laser but he didn't draw it. He kept his eye on the two fire/fighting pokemon as they continued making their way forward. If they launched an attack, there was every chance the other fighting types would join the fray, especially those who were more fired up like the primeape, type disadvantage or not.

"Keep moving, Cap'n."

Anchor steered him along with a paw on his back, clenching the other one at his side so the sharp claws poked out of his gauntlet. The muscles in the granbull's body were taut, but he kept both eyes on the road, pointedly ignoring the rabble as they made their way through.

A glass exploded at Macro's feet followed by a jeer from the monferno, and his fur bristled. His claws fastened around his laser and he battled the urge to whip it out and fire at the offending fire types. Stomping hooves rushed at them and the mawile snatched himself from Anchor's grip and span to face the onslaught.

Three fire types surrounded them and Macro's muzzle pulled back into a sneer. Great. They'd found a friend. He eyed the combusken with caution hidden behind a mask of disgust.

"I think I'd quite like forty thousand credits. What about you, boys?" The monferno laughed and tossed his glass into a nearby dumpster. "Let's show this runt who's boss around here, eh?"

He smirked and balled his paws into fists. Heat radiated from them and Macro took an unconscious step back right into the emboar.

"Would ya look at that?" the pig pokemon scoffed with mock surprise. "The little pirate's scared!"

"How about we settle this?" The monferno flashed his sharp canines. "Fair fight. No guns."

Macro tutted and flexed his claws against his laser's handle. No guns… then it wouldn't be a fair fight.

"Back off, bro," Anchor growled. "We're here on a job. We'll soon be out of your fur."

He steered Macro from the group, but the emboar reached down and grabbed the mawile by his horn. Macro yelled and whipped out his laser, firing a blue beam right into the emboar's stomach. The large

pokemon released him as he went rolling backwards down the street, bowling over a pair of scraggy and a mankey who let out screams of protest.

Macro couldn't help but chuckle as the small, ragged white monkey leapt onto the emboar's head and stamped his lanky feet.

"Oi!" The monferno snarled. "I said no guns!"

He brought a blazing fist down towards the mawile. Macro ducked and hot fire licked at his fur. He fired his laser between the flaming monkey's legs right at the combusken. The giant chicken leapt aside, but the monferno let out a grunt as electricity coursed along his body and sent him flying in a graceful ark away from Macro and into the opposite bar's window. Glass exploded in a cascade of flames, the orange hue lighting up the glass shards as they danced along the tarmac floor.

The combusken hissed and launched a flamethrower from his beak, missing Macro by a hair's breadth as he rolled to the side. His paw struck warm flesh and he stumbled, falling flat onto his back. The emboar grunted and pushed himself up, keeping an eye on Macro as a sinister smile spread across his snout. The mankey was still atop his head, clawing at his flesh as he shrieked profanities. The emboar reached up and flicked the primate aside then turned his attention back onto Macro. Before the giant boar had a chance to ready an attack, Anchor's fist collided with his head, knocking him back down to the ground. Then the large bulldog threw himself at the combusken, hitting him in mid-air and crashing him into the floor.

"You go get that disk!" he roared. "I'll deal with this lot!"

Macro tutted and ducked past him. "You have to be kidding me?"

"Nope! I'll meet you there in like five minutes."

Macro shot him a leer over his shoulder and bolted down the road towards the square. Two machamp rushed out of a bar and cut him

off. The larger of the two looked over his head at the battle and his brow furrowed. He opened his mouth to speak as the other one raised his four fists. Macro grabbed the aggressive one, locking his jaw-like horn around his ankle, and brought him up in an arc over his head. The machamp's body collided with his brother and the pair of them rolled into a heap of limbs in the middle of the road. A trio of scraggy faltered right behind them, but the two primeape accompanying them bounded over the fleshy obstacle and pounced onto the mawile.

Macro roared as he tried to shake them off. One of them wrapped both arms around his horn, locking it shut and dragging him backwards under his weight. The other primeape fastened his paws around his neck, shrieking incoherently as its claws dug into the flesh of his throat, slowly cutting off his air supply. Macro twisted his arm so his laser nozzle was jabbing into the ape's stomach. It was still set to water, but it should do enough damage to at least get the offending pokemon off him. He squeezed the trigger and fired.

The primeape flew away from him and Macro's mouth opened in a scream as his sharp claws raked over his throat. A sizzle of electricity resounded behind him with a sickening thud, and the ragged ape went flying over the buildings ahead of him like a baseball. The other was tugged free and sent soaring after him.

Anchor yanked Macro to his feet and shoved him along, covering his back in a flailing fury of fists and electricity.

Macro's paws pounded the floor as he propelled himself over the tarmac. He kept his laser clasped in his right paw, ready to pick off any more fire types. More primeape burst from a bar, followed by a hitmonlee who's elastic legs swung down towards Macro as the slender fighting type cartwheeled over the heads of the angry apes. He brought his horn up into his stomach, sending him rolling into Anchor's waiting fists. Then he grabbed two of the primeape in quick succession, throwing them back into the bar. One of them leapt over his head, crashing his paws down onto the base of his horn. The mawile let out a grunt and keeled forwards, but he kept pressing on.

His eyes unfocused with the impact and he tried to blink and rub at them to correct it. Another impact struck his jaw and he flew sideways until his body struck cold stone. He didn't get the chance to get a good look at his assailant as they were soon thrown back into the bar they came from by Anchor.

The mawile dragged himself back to his feet, ignoring the pulsing pain in his jaw. He retrieved his laser which had clattered into the road during his tumble, and took off after Anchor. The granbull had cleared the path of yet more primeape, leaving them in a sizzling heap on the doorstep of a bar. Someone pounded against the door, desperately trying to force their way out past the heavy, unconscious, hairy bodies.

Finally, the road spread out into a large square surrounded by mechanical trees. The lack of buildings provided a clear view of the dome over the city. Stars twinkled beyond it, and against the black sky he could just make out Wildcard Gamma circling overhead. The blue hull was almost camouflaged against the dark sky.

Perched right at the edge of the square stood a monolith of a building. A large digital clock spread over the highest, central peak. Its deep grey and chrome structure intimidated the other buildings, leaving it as the only one spread over the entire east side of the square. Not even a road had space to fork from it. More buildings spread around the west edge, broken up only by a road sheltered under a bridge that joined two eateries.

Nothing gave away the identity of the grey building. It reeked of government activity. Even its colours reminded him of Socket. Whatever went on in there was a mystery.

"I reckon we'll have a tough time when we get in there," said Anchor.

Shadows fell over the square and the two space pirates looked back at the road of clubs and bars. Primeape and mankey had climbed onto the roofs, perching at the edge as they fixed the two fairy types with vicious leers. Machamp, machoke and the hitmonchan and

hawlucha stood barring their access back into the road, matching the primate's glares.

"Think we'll have a tough time when we come back out, too," said Macro, turning his attention back to the building. "Well. What are we waiting for?"

He pulled his lock pick from his pouch and began jigging it in the building's front door lock. Anchor stomped away from him, moving up and down the grey structure. The lock was less than co-operative and it took some force to bust open. With the loud ping that echoed around the silent square, he was convinced he'd broken it.

"Ain't no way round the back without going through the gate," Anchor said as he rejoined Macro. "So there's no easy way out if we get stuck around there."

Macro cast a cautious glance to the fighting pokemon standing like sentries in the streets and atop roofs. He wanted to believe the walls meant no pokemon could get into the back easily, either. But walls were nothing to an agile fighting type. If they got stuck, they'd be sitting duckletts, and he had no idea how many more pokemon waited on the other side.

He pushed the door open, holding his gun in his free paw.

Darkness.

He squinted and moved slowly inside, Anchor close behind him. The only noise that reached his ears was their breathing and an engine humming somewhere. A sharp smell of oil stabbed his senses and he covered his muzzle, desperately trying to see through the darkness. Inky black. Just like oil.

His paw groped over the wall for a light. A flash, and the entire room flooded with a white light that bounced off the brilliant, white walls.

Anchor peered down at him, his large paw pressed over a light panel. He removed his paw and nodded ahead of him, drawing the mawile's attention to the double doors that spread across the blank hallway. No stairs off to their left or right, just a set of double doors with no windows. Macro felt his fur stand on end all along his spine.

The large fairy type motioned for him to stand flat against the wall, then strode past him and stood beside the doors, nudging one of them open. A torrent of flames flew down it, the heat licking at Macro's fur and lighting the walls up with a sunset orange. Once it fizzled out, the mawile aimed his gun through the doors and fired. A yelp split the air followed by a thud as a heavy body struck the tile floor.

The two space pirates moved through the door, Anchor staying ahead. He checked over the fallen blaziken and waved a paw for Macro to follow him close to the wall. Dark doors stretched down the corridor, and half way flashed a green sign for the stairs.

Macro checked his map, the green overlay vibrant against the ivory walls. The information Surge had sent him told him the disk was contained in the IT room on the second floor, locked inside a safe. The code was a mystery to him, it hadn't been provided. He wondered if the zigzagoon could have obtained it if she'd searched hard enough.

The stairs wound half way up, leaving a brief level of flat and a blind spot. As they turned around it, the leering reptilian face of a kommo-o loomed before them. His lips pulled back from a row of sharp, dagger-like teeth, and his body bounced up and down, every large scale on his body crashing down like a cymbal. Macro covered his ears and fell backwards into Anchor. The granbull roared and cowered over the smaller pokemon, his large paws pressed into either side of his head.

Macro's eyes snapped back open, fixing on the huge, gaping mouth of the scaly dragon. He leapt out from beneath Anchor and swung his horn right into the kommo-o's open maw. Teeth shattered against

his horn and the clanging fizzled out into an erratic clash as the dragon rolled away from him.

The kommo-o gathered himself quickly, rolling onto all-fours. His muzzle creased in a sneer, flashing his broken canines. He wiped blood from his mouth and opened it wide, sending out a stream of flames. Macro ducked beneath them, flinching as they brushed over his horn. Anchor grunted and threw himself over his head, landing in the thick of the dragon's fire. His pink fur was singed black around his shoulders and ears, but he brought his sparking gauntlet down into the kommo-o's head. Once. Twice.

The kommo-o's jaws locked around Anchor's wrist, digging into his flesh. He grimaced and brought his head into the reptile's nose. He yelped, releasing his fist. Anchor brought it back down for a third crack to his jaw. The large reptile keeled sideways, his tongue lolling in the air as he crashed into the floor with an almighty clatter.

Anchor beat himself down, sending up small puffs of soot, and stared down at the large lizard.

"Put up a fight, this one," he said as he nudged the reptile's large foot with his own. "The last time you were up against a kommo-o, you took it down in one hit."

"Yeh, well." Macro moved past him to check the door. "Last time I had enough time to think and enough space to catch it with a 'play rough'. This time, I had to resort to an 'iron head', instead."

Anchor slumped against the door and let out a ragged sigh. Macro looked up at him, one paw resting on the door's handle.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I think that guy poisoned me." He rubbed at his wrist and glanced down at the unconscious dragon.

Macro frowned and turned back to the door. "I didn't bring supplies. Call Matrix and ask him to pick you up. I'll go on alone."

"Screw that." Anchor dragged himself from the door and shoved it open. "I can hang on. I ain't no invalid."

"All right…"

Anchor frowned at the hesitation in Macro's voice and trudged down the dark corridor. Macro followed after him, his claws fastened tight around his laser. Dim light flowed in from the square through narrow windows, creating long shadows across the far wall. Each room they passed was just as dark as the ones on the ground floor. Macro wondered how much light the building got during the day. It felt depressing, despite the white walls. At least on this floor it didn't stink of oil.

A soft ring came from his ear piece and a green dot flashed steadily on his map overlay. The IT room was on their right. He paused by the door and peered through the dark window. Lights flashed from a machine against the far wall, and one of the holoscreens was lit up with a dim, grey light. He guessed the kommo-o had been using it since he couldn't see any other pokemon in the room.

He shoved the door open and slipped inside before Anchor. Not a pokemon in sight.

"Pretty lax on guards for a government digs," said Anchor.

"I'm not gonna complain," said Macro.

He scurried across the room towards the flashing machine and checked over it for any sign of the safe. It was connected to something. An alarm, or every computer in the room. If it was the latter, then it was pretty retro. Most computers had built-in hard drives to keep them compact, and almost every scrap of data was saved to a wireless network called The Stars.

Anchor's breathing was coming in raspy bursts as he paced around the room, keeping one eye on the door while searching for the safe. Whatever the kommo-o had injected into him was rapidly taking effect.

"She definitely said in here?" he asked.

"Yup." Macro moved along the wall, feeling for a light switch. "That's not to say they haven't moved it, however."

Anchor let out a snort. "That would be a waste of time."

"I know. So keep looking."

The granbull returned to the door and slammed his paw into the light panel, filling the room with light. Macro raised a paw to shield his eyes and gave Anchor a thankful nod. He searched around the room with his eyes again and they lit up as a huge grin spread across his face.

"I found it!" he cheered.

He dived across the room back to the flickering machine and stared up at a huge white, cast iron door set in the wall. It was no wonder he hadn't seen it. In the dark, it looked like any other area of wall. It lay flush beside the machine. The dial to unlock it was hidden behind a lock shield that could be easily pushed aside by any paw.

"Could I borrow you, Anchor?" he said. "I need to stand on your shoulders to reach this."

"You can't use a chair?" The granbull wiped a paw across his forehead, scattering beads of sweat onto the tiled floor.

Macro looked him up and down then cast a solemn look around the room.

"They all have wheels," he said. "I can't exactly stack them."

"All right." Anchor trudged over to him and lifted him onto his shoulders. "Make it fast."

The mawile shoved the lock guard aside and eyed the ancient contraption. All safes were much the same. A large, rotatory lock that you had to turn in a highly specific combination. They'd been around for centuries and hadn't evolved much at all. Why change something that worked?

It certainly made his job easier.

He pressed his ear to the cold metal and turned the lock, listening for the tell-tale clicks. They were usually formed of eight numbers. That was something that had changed. The codes had become longer, leaving more time for the authorities to catch thieves in action.

Two down. The room was oddly silent, unnerving. He wanted to listen for any oncoming attacks, but he needed all his attention to remain focused on the safe. He glanced down at Anchor as he slowly turned the dial. The granbull was still visibly sweating and he looked like he was going to keel over at any moment.

Three clicks.

"Take my laser," he told Anchor. "In case anyone runs in."

The larger pirate reached up to Macro's belt and pulled his right laser free. It seemed tiny in his massive paws, but it would get the job done.

Five clicks.

A shadow fell over them and he instinctively looked over at the door. The kommo-o… he tutted, keeping all his attention on the safe. Six clicks.

The large reptile filled the room with his clanging scales, the obnoxious sound reverberating off the bare walls. The machine

beside them began to sizzle and its lights went out, along with the fluorescent bulbs sending down a shower of tiny shards. They cut into Macro's flesh and he flinched, straining to ignore the jabbing pain.

Anchor raised his laser and fired, striking the kommo-o on the chest. It was enough to stop the clanging, but it left Macro's ears ringing. He barely heard the seventh click. He pressed his ear and left shoulder flat against the door, turning the dial carefully.

The kommo-o regathered himself, flashing his broken canines. This reptile's insistence was becoming ridiculous. Before he could clang his heavy scales together once more, Anchor fired another water laser into his face. The reptile shook his head, his large scales grating together like claws on slate.

Eight clicks.

The lock lifted and Macro pulled it open, revealing disk after disk, each tiny chip-card sorted into plastic boxes. His heart sank. Where would he even begin? His eyes flashed to the dragon pokemon and he narrowed his eyes. First thing was first, he needed to get rid of the distraction.

He threw himself off Anchor's shoulders and vaulted the computer desks one by one until his horn locked around the reptile's throat. He swung him over his head twice then launched him from the room. His large body struck the wall and he slid down it, unconscious.

Macro marched back over to the safe, beating his long fur down with his paws.

"Right," he said as he looked over the stacks of plastic boxes. "Now to sort through all this mess."

Anchor reached up and pulled the top-most box down. On it was written 'miscellaneous'.

Macro took it and muttered under his breath, "Smart ass."

It only contained five chip cards, each one clearly labeled with a number. All but one. One was entirely blank. He turned it around in his claws and looked back down at the disks labeled one to four. Only one memory disk was stored in each facility. It only made sense that the disk Socket would have sent to them would be the unlabeled one. Why make it clear which disk it is, if she wanted to keep it away from DL?

Nevertheless, he pocketed the lot, stuffing them into his pouch.

"All right, let's get out of this dump." He stuffed the empty box back into the safe and slammed the heavy door.

Anchor handed his laser back. The handle was sweaty and Macro absently wiped it on his scarf before holding it ready at his side. He bolted from the room, pausing in the doorway. The door to the stairs flew open, revealing the blaziken and two passimian. Macro tutted. Where had the two apes come from?

Flames lit up the corridor from the blaziken's beak and Macro ducked back into the room. Once they'd fizzled out, he poked his head around the door and fired his laser, striking the large rooster on the beak. He wiped at it with his claws and shook his head, taking a step back.

The two passimian shrieked and rushed at him, throwing their heavy, round berry stones. Macro ducked and bolted away from the stairs, searching his map for the nearest exit. Each stone bounced off the walls and the monkey pokemon snatched them back with acrobatic leaps, catching them in their tails and sending them down towards the two pirates.

Anchor smashed one aside with his gauntlets, the electricity splitting it like a tamato berry.

The map flashed the next exit, revealing it to be at the end of the corridor, but it led out to the back of the building. The mawile tutted. That was the one place he didn't want to go. He quickly fired up a message to Wildcard Gamma with their estimated co-ordinates and pounded the floor with his feet, propelling himself away from the passimian and blaziken.

More flames lit up the corridor, baking the air and searing across his shoulders. He heard Anchor grunt behind him and he quickly fired another water laser at the blaziken. This time it hit one of the passimian, knocking him out of the air mid-leap. The blaziken merely leapt over his fallen comrade, bringing a blazing foot down towards Anchor. Macro turned one-eighty and pulled out his second laser, firing two streams of blue into the blaziken's torso. The large bird crashed onto the floor, the impact knocking the air out of his lungs.

The second passimian leapt over the giant rooster, his mouth open wide and revealing two rows of sharp teeth. Anchor swung his arm towards him and the ape's jaws locked over his gauntlet. The primate shrieked and fell back, wiping a paw across his mouth and fixing the two space pirates in a vicious leer.

Macro turned and kept running, reaching the door before the three pokemon could pick themselves back up. The back stairs were as white as the rest of the building, lit up with an emergency light that flickered weakly. He kicked the bar over the door, setting off the building's alarm. It whirred ominously and the entire building woke up as every light leading to the emergency exits flared to life.

Just like Anchor had predicted, the back of the building was barred off with high walls. Sat at the far end of the courtyard was a large tank painted with a red flame and the words 'danger'.

Oil.

Macro's face split into a grin and he turned his back on it to face the blaziken and his two allies. More pokemon vaulted the wall. Mankey,

primeape, hawlucha, hitmonchan… but each one of them froze as the mawile aimed his laser at the tank.

Fear flashed in their eyes and many of them took a step back, bracing themselves to run. Even the blaziken. The flames on his wrists fizzled out and he raised his claws to his chest.

"Come on then!" Macro roared. "What are you waiting for? Or are you too scared?"

The blaziken's beak pulled up into a sneer. "You wouldn't do it. You'd blow us all up."

Macro chuckled. "You underestimate me."

Anchor doubled over beside him, placing his paws on his knees, but the look he gave him was filled with scepticism. Macro winked and looked back up at the group of fighting pokemon. Several of the mankey vanished back into the streets and he couldn't see a single hitmonchan any more. The blaziken looked from Macro to the tank and back. Useless. All their attacks were useless. The only ones they could use that would do anything to the mawile were fire attacks, and not one of them was going to risk that next to a flammable tank of oil. Macro threw his head back and laughed, a hysterical laugh that drew another glance from the granbull. One hit, and the entire thing would go up in flames. The damage a tank that size could do would be devastating.

Neon pink flashed on his vision and he reached up to grab the ladder. He fixed the fighting pokemon with a grin, keeping his laser focused on the tank as the ladder whipped the space pirates back up towards his ship. The blaziken's roar filled the air and he stamped his feet on the ground along with the mankey and primeape. Macro laughed again and sheathed his laser, just in time for Wildcard Gamma to draw them inside.

One memory disk down. Four more to go. This was going to be too easy.

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 11

A/N - Thanks for the new faves and follows! =D

Chapter Eleven

Macro strolled into the cockpit and adjusted his goggles which had become askew at some point during their frantic get-away from Scanner City. Matrix twisted in his seat and fixed him him with a somewhat blank yet curious stare he felt only the ribombee could manage.

"Did you get it?" Matrix asked.

Macro smirked and reached into his pouch, and pulled out the five tiny disks.

Matrix's large eyes widened and he took them. "You got them all?"

"Nope. But one of them has to be it." He eyed DL's wooden crate and frowned when he saw her huddled up inside. "What's she doing in there?"

"Sleeping." Matrix thumbed through the disks then slipped one into his pocket computer. "I'm gonna check them all. We don't want to fill her with useless data. Where's Anchor?"

"Raiding Cookie's medical berries. He got hit by a toxic from a kommo-o."

The ribombee looked at him over his shoulder. "Is he all right?"

"He should be. He just needs some pecha berries and a good rest."

"Huh." Matrix turned back to his computer. "You look pretty beat up yourself."

Macro absently rubbed at the marks on his neck and flinched. It still felt sore. So did his shoulders and upper back.

"Those fighting types put up a fight," he said. "I might see if a shower fixes it."

"It might, but it won't make your fur grow back."

Macro faltered in the doorway and cast a glance back at the ribombee. How much fur had he lost?! He rushed to the shower room and paused before the mirror, and tutted. Matrix had been over-exaggerating. The long fur beside his face had been singed slightly and around his upper arms had been singed black, with just a small patch by his elbow completely burned away. The black would wash off after a shower and just look a little tatty for a while.

He pulled his scarf off, flinching as the movement seared his shoulders. It sported a considerable tear where the primeape had clawed him, and given it's dark colour it was difficult to see if it had any blood stains. Frustrating. He was beginning to run low on scarves. He tossed it onto a chair with his goggles, belt and lasers and switched on the shower, letting the hot, lavender-scented water cascade over him.

It stung the scratches on his throat and he screwed his eyes shut, letting himself sink down on the tiled floor. The hot water soothed the throbbing that had started in his shoulders and back. He'd taken way too much of a beating, and not just from other pokemon's attacks but his own. Some of those fighting types were heavy. Throwing them was a task in itself. But the sheer number of them… If it weren't for Anchor, he likely wouldn't have come out of that brawl alive. Law or not, primeape and mankey weren't known for their merciful outbursts. When they rampaged, they did so violently. The best case scenario, he'd be thrown behind bars and whichever pokemon handed him in would be rolling in his bounty while Scanner City were awarded a badge of honor.

He ran a paw over his aching head and watched as the black marks were washed to a pale brown. That bounty… the only reason he had it was because he was the face of Wildcard Gamma. Nothing he'd done could have been accomplished on his own. He was small but gutsy. Many dragon, dark and fighting types feared him because they couldn't do anything to him. He didn't have Anchor's physical strength or Matrix's intelligence. He just knew how to aim and fire a gun, how to pick locks, how to be sneaky. It was all typical pirate stuff. The only reason his reward was so high was because he'd annoyed Socket… on more than one occasion. One instance wasn't even planned. To this day he could still see that fire, see himself fleeing as though he was nothing more than an onlooker.

He didn't know how long he sat there, letting the heat from the shower soothe the pain away. As he stood back up, water flowed from his long fur and soaked the floor as he shook himself dry. Violently enough to shake those thoughts away before he left the washroom.

He swung by his room to grab another scarf and wound it around his neck and shoulders as he strolled back into the cockpit.

"Still no sign of Anchor?" he asked Matrix.

"He poked his head around the door to say he was going to bed." The ribombee looked up at him and wound a paw into his antennae. "You were in there a while."

Macro shrugged and reached for one of the tiny disks. "Did you find out which one it is?"

"Yup." Matrix picked one up, the one that didn't have a number inked on it. "This one. It's full of jargon and doesn't have a title or anything. But from what I can understand of computer code, it's definitely to do with her."

He nodded towards the pachirisu and Macro looked around at her instinctively. She was still sleeping, her chest rising and falling softly

with her head leaning against the side of the box. He grabbed the jack lead and moved over to her.

"Fire up the disk," he said.

"You're waking her?"

"I want to get the ball rolling," he said. "And I'd rather do it before I head to bed. I'm beat, and I don't want this looming over me."

"All right, if you say so." Matrix turned his seat and stuck the disk into his computer.

Macro grabbed DL's shoulder and shook her gently. "Hey. Wake up."

Her eyes fluttered open and, as usual, she rubbed a paw over them and fixed him with her blank, chocolate brown stare.

"My internal clock tells me it is not morning," she said. "Is there an emergency? I hear no alarm."

"It's not an emergency." Macro reached behind her neck with the jack lead. "I just need to download something onto you."

"My faculties do not allow that," she said. "It will compromise my programming."

"Tough. You belong to me. Co-operate."

She fixed him with a sideways stare as he pushed her forwards to plug the jack into the socket at the base of her skull. Matrix buzzed over to them and placed the USB end into his pocket computer.

"This should only take a moment." He scratched the base of his antennae and frowned at his computer. "I really hope this works."

He tapped the computer screen and DL's chocolate gaze broke as her pupils became impossibly wide. Macro sat back with one paw on

the floor, staring at the pachirisu in horror. They hadn't just killed her? He shook his head, his mouth unable to form words.

Matrix caught his attention with a sideways glance. "It'll take five minutes."

Macro reached up and groped for the bug's computer. "Stop it!"

"I can't stop it," Matrix said calmly. "I'm uploading data. It'll end up corrupting if I break it off now."

Corrupting… All Macro could do was watch DL helplessly as she slumped forward on her knees, fixing the wall of her crate with a blank, unseeing stare. His heart hammered behind his ribs. She was alive. Empty, but alive. If they killed her trying to give her back her memories, then he could add the highest of crimes to his already extensive list.

Then watch his bounty double again. Even the worst of pirates wouldn't stand for that crime. Everyone would be after his head.

DL's eyes fluttered again and refocused, lighting up briefly as she came back to reality. She stretched and yawned widely as though waking up from a deep sleep.

"I think we're done," said Matrix. "You can disconnect her now."

Macro gave him a wary glance then reached over to remove the jack lead. DL didn't so much as flinch. Had it even worked?

"I appear to have received an update," she said. "My processes are flagging it as 'junk data'. Quarantining."

"No!" Macro grabbed both her shoulders and turned her to face him, fixing his violet eyes on hers. "Do not quarantine it!"

She blinked a couple of times then nodded. "This update appears to be important to you. Understood. Force-stopping quarantine."

He fell back onto his bottom and let out a sigh, running his paws over his face.

"I need a good sleep," he said. "I think I'm going to call it a night."

"Likewise." DL shuffled back into her crate. "Sleep is necessary for optimum cognitive function."

He watched her as she shifted to get comfy and leant her head against the side of the crate. Crate. She was still sleeping in that splintered eyesore of a crate.

"Come with me," he said. "I'll sort you a room. We have two spare."

She looked up at him with what he thought might have been confusion, but her eyes were still blank. "A room? My box is ample room enough."

"It isn't," he said. "You need a bed, just like any other pokemon."

"I'm a computer. Do you give your computer a bed?"

"Don't get snarky with me, DL."

"I don't understand snarky. It was merely a question."

He grabbed her paw and tugged her to her feet. "You're having a room like a normal pokemon. Now come with me."

He exchanged a flustered glance with one of Matrix's curious ones and dragged the pachirisu from the cockpit. Wildcard Gamma contained six bedrooms, four of which were occupied. Loud snores came from the first room on the right, beside the washroom. Cookie preferred to be there as he could quickly wash up before he entered the kitchen. Only his alarm could wake him. Macro often wondered if he could sleep through a blitz since he'd slept through horrific turbulence that woke the rest of the crew and had them in a panic, but if his alarm went off he'd be up and cooking within ten minutes.

Macro stopped at the room opposite his and pushed the door open. A quilt lay folded on the bed, its former white now a musty grey. He grabbed it and shook it out, sending a cloud of dust into the air. He coughed and turned his head back, and DL let out a small sneeze from the doorway. She wiped a paw over her nose and looked from him to the duvet.

"I can sort this out," she said. "It's okay."

"No." Macro let the quilt fall to the floor and moved over to the bed, tugging the draw open. He rubbed at his shoulder then pulled out a blue and white quilt cover. "I'll deal with it. It's the least I can do after letting you sleep in a box."

"Crate," she corrected. "And it was what I came in. I was happy there."

"You wouldn't know happy if it leapt up and smacked you on the nose," he said. "But we're working on that."

He tossed a pillow case onto the bed and started stuffing the quilt into the cover. DL moved over to the bed and joined him, placing the pillow inside the case. His shoulder complained again and he stopped to rub at it, clutching the quilt in one paw.

"You appear to be in pain," she said. "You should lie down."

He grunted and returned to stuffing the quilt cover, but she took it from his paws and set it on the bed.

"I can help," she said. "I know basic back massage."

"Not a chance! Besides, I don't allow girls in my room. Gentlemon's pride." He reached for the quilt, but she beat his paws aside. He narrowed his eyes in a leer. "Seriously, DL!"

She picked it up, keeping her eyes on him as she neatly straightened out the quilt. "You don't need to be in your own room for a massage.

Even the floor would suffice. Besides, I can continue here. I know what I'm doing."

"Whatever." He raised his paws and moved from the room. "Do what you want. I'm going to bed."

He stormed across the hall to his own room and slammed the door. That pachirisu… he fell face first onto his bed and groaned. All they'd gone through for that disk and it had made virtually no change to her whatsoever. Junk data. That's what she'd called it. Was it even worth continuing? He seriously doubted it.

Five disks. Five disks of 'junk data'. Was there a chance Matrix was wrong and they'd obtained the wrong one?

He heard his door open and soft paws pad across the room. He cracked an eye open, fixing on the white torso of the 'living computer'.

"I thought I told you I don't allow girls in my room," he said.

"The door is open," she replied. "Besides, you said 'do what you want', and I want to help you. It's in my programming to serve."

"Persistent, aren't you?" He let out a sigh and closed his eye. "Fine. If it'll shut you up."

The mattress sank beside him and she brushed her paws over his back, shifting his scarf out of the way.

"I didn't think mawile had stripes," she said. "But you have two. Such anomalies are not in my files."

He cracked an eye open, but he couldn't see her from the angle she was sat at. Two brown, horizontal stripes like a pikachu. His scarf usually covered them. He gave a shrug and let his eye close again.

"It's a birthmark," he said flatly.

"Oh, I see. I'll make a note of that."

He began to mutter something under his breath but it was cut off as she dug into his shoulders. He grit his teeth together, but the pain ebbed away in seconds as his sore, tense muscles relaxed. He nuzzled into his pillow, and as she moved her way down his back he found it hard to focus on the issue of those disks any more. His mind went blank, and he instead drifted off into a deep sleep.

…

The cell gate slammed shut and the croagunk pushed himself up onto his knees, fixing the delphox with a leer.

"I told you I did nothin'!" he roared.

"That's not what I was told." Tracer leant back against the opposite wall and stared at the frog pokemon through the bars. "Your pocket computer's number came up. The hacking was traced back to you."

"But it wasn't me!"

"Can't help you. Evidence is evidence."

"You just don't believe me 'cos I'm a poison type!" said the croagunk. "You posh psychic types are all the same! Snobby do-gooders! You have a death wish walkin' through the outskirts, delphox."

"So you're saying you're not a do-gooder?" Tracer tutted softly as he shook his head. "Not exactly helping your case, are you?"

The croagunk pulled his lips back in a snarl and Tracer rolled his eyes.

"Like I said, I can't help you. I'm not in charge any more. You're out of my paws." Tracer kicked back from the wall and waved a dismissive paw. "Appeal to your attorney."

"You think I can afford a freakin' attorney?! I live in the outskirts!"

The croagunk's rant faded as the door to the cells shut. Tracer exchanged glances with Widget and the eevee beamed, creasing the neon green microchip pattern around his left eye.

"Same old sob story, eh?" he asked.

Tracer shrugged and leant against the wall as he lit up a cigar.

"They always plead innocent," he said. "I just worry what might happen if one of them is actually crying the truth, and no one will listen."

Widget shrugged his shoulders. "That might have happened a billion times already and we'd never know."

"Poor kid can't even afford an attorney." Tracer blew out a cloud of smoke and looked back over at the closed door. The prisoner's shouts were muffled and incoherent through that iron structure. "Nothing in place for him to gain one either. They only take a guaranteed payment, so it's Socket's word against his. He's screwed."

The eevee's nose crinkled in thought and he shrugged again. "Oh well. Back to the slums for us then, eh?"

Tracer grunted and stubbed out his cigar on the wall before popping it into his trench coat pocket. He pulled out their masks and fastened his back over his face, making sure there were no gaps around the rubber edging before following the eevee towards the air lock.

When it opened, air blew out through a vent, keeping all the toxins between the main doors and those that separated them from the toxic streets of Proxy City. Meta Prison had stood in the outskirts for many years, serving as a threatening monument that kept crime down in that particular city. The other two outskirts were a nightmare in comparison.

Tracer looked up at the dingy, grey building. Behind it rose one of the bright chrome and white skyscrapers of Meta City and the branches of one of the capital's many mechanical trees. One would think the edge of Proxy City would be cleaner than the rest. How the capital was cleaner than the outskirts that stood so close to it was a mystery. Those trees did their job, but they did it in a very localised fashion.

He turned his back on the prison and joined Widget across the road where he sat waiting patiently. His eyes sparkled up at him through his mask and he fell beside the delphox's side, keeping pace with him all the way back to Spool City. It was a long walk. One that made him glad of his companion and his trusty laser stick.

…

When Macro opened his eyes again, the room felt bright. Soft sunlight flowed through his blind and he slowly pushed himself up. His shoulders complained, but not as much as they had been doing the previous evening. He rubbed at his left shoulder and turned, and his sheet fell down over his hips. He fixed it with a raised eyebrow. Definitely no recollection of having pulled it over himself when he fell into bed. It must have been DL…

He looked over at the closed door and kicked the sheet off. Even if she had covered him over, he was still wearing his scarf and belt, although both his lasers had been set on his night stand. He popped them both back into their holsters and strolled from his room, stretching as he entered the hallway. Refreshed, not the slightest bit groggy. It had been a good night's sleep, he couldn't deny that.

The sweet smell of pancakes flowed from the kitchen, drawing him in like a beacon. He fell into his usual spot at the table, near oblivious to the pachirisu who'd taken up Matrix's spot opposite him yet again. He reached for the steaming pile of pancakes and froze, fixing her with a confused look out of the corner of his eye.

"Sleep well?" she asked.

"Yes?" The hesitation in his voice seemed to take her by surprise.

"Are you asking or telling me?"

"I slept fine." He slipped two pancakes onto his plate and reached for the cheri sauce.

Anchor held his heaped fork just before his mouth as he looked from the living computer to Macro and back.

"Have I missed something?" he asked.

"Nothing." Macro poured the sauce onto his pancakes. "Isn't Matrix joining us this morning?"

"Ooh, the night owl came in here just as I started cooking!" Cookie grabbed his own plate, already stacked with pancakes and butter. "I often wonder if he even sleeps."

"He sleeps," said Anchor. "And snores. I'm in the room beside him, I should know."

"So long as we've all slept well, that is good." DL reached over for the plate of pancakes. "I understand you are not all computers, but the brain does need to shut down and recharge otherwise you might crash."

The three space pirates watched the pachirisu as she poured cheri sauce over her breakfast. Cookie trembled so violently the berry atop his head jiggled from side to side. She lifted a fork of fluffy pancake dripping with sweet, red sauce and popped it into her mouth. Macro visibly flinched, expecting another outburst of lectures, and Cookie's chair dragged across the floor as he scooted as far away from her as his distance from his plate would allow.

DL's eyes lit up and she leant back in her seat with the fork still in her mouth. She threw herself back towards her plate and began

devouring the cheri-soaked pancakes with a vigour that almost put the slurpuff to shame.

"Erm…" Macro tapped the side of his plate with his fork and glanced at the granbull and chef, exchanging equally confused expressions. "Are you okay, DL?"

"Hmm?" She looked up and wiped cheri sauce from her cheek. "Yes. Why?"

"You just… seem to be enjoying your breakfast."

"Quite a lot," Cookie added. "You might give yourself indigestion at this rate."

"Oh." She looked back down at her plate and loaded her fork up again. "I'm sorry, cheri berries are my favourite. I'll slow down."

Favourite…

Macro stared at her in bewilderment. She had a favourite? After her lecture about sweets the previous day, she now had a favourite? He chuckled and caught a small grin from Anchor before they both tucked into their own breakfast.

A favourite… so the memory disk had worked. It wasn't a lost cause after all.

…

Surge pulled her tympole ship up outside the huge white mansion in the centre of Meta City. White, clean, with a garden filled with artificial topiaries and grass. Two large mechanical trees stood at either side of the pristine courtyard. The zigzagoon felt it a shame to walk across it, almost worried her feet would leave dirty prints on the pale paving flags that lined the neat pathway. As she reached the door, the two pidgeot standing sentry fixed her with their tiny, black eyes.

"State your purpose," one of them said.

"Socket requested me," she said. "My name is Surge."

The huge bird kept his eyes on her as he spoke into his mouth piece. "Someone called Surge is here for Socket."

"Ooh!" The voice was oddly shrill, almost bell-like. "She's cool. Let her in!"

The pidgeot frowned, but it wasn't aimed at her. He stood aside and pushed the door open with his large wing. She thanked him, feeling both their eyes on her as she strolled inside.

It was equally white with the odd painting along the wall. Not one of them was of a single pokemon, all depicting landscapes of Meta City throughout the decades. The oldest one dated back two hundred years ago, when they first erected the mansion and the mechanical trees. It was titled 'Cleaning Up Our Act'.

A bell chime reached her ears, growing louder as whatever carried it rounded the corner. She frowned into the foyer, but the only pokemon she could see was a furret sat behind the desk while talking quietly on the phone.

"Surge, I guess?"

She looked down at her feet into the beaming face of a chingling. The tiny bell pokemon barely came up to her knee.

"This way!" He flopped away from her, his tassel-like hair bobbing with each bounce.

He led her around the corner and down another corridor with yet more paintings. Each one was a different area of Meta City, artfully taken so as not to show even the smallest hint of the outskirts. The city's various pokemon species filled the streets, mostly made up of normal and psychic type pokemon but with the odd dual-type

scattered here and there. Nevertheless, each picture had a cheerful air to it. Its cleanness was emphasized as it even depicted the alleyways between the tall chrome and white buildings.

The chingling cleared his throat and Surge froze, looking back over her shoulder. He stood beaming at her from beside an open door.

"Just in here," he said before flopping inside.

She followed him slowly, peering around the door at the tidy office. A computer desk stood at her right, empty despite the holoscreen glowing brightly in the air. A container filled with pens stood beside it next to an open note pad. Ahead of her sat Socket behind her desk and she looked up as she entered. A gothitelle, her entire black torso covered with white ribbons. Each one was a part of her body, but the ones around her dramatically tufted ears were not. Her red lips curled up in a smile that, despite looking friendly, sent a chill through Surge's body.

"Come in, come in!" Socket rose and moved over to her, extending a slender black paw. "Surge, right?"

The zigzagoon took her paw and shook it once before the gothitelle let it fall back to her side. She turned away from her and returned to her desk.

"Please," she said. "Take a seat."

Surge sat opposite her, giving the room one more glance and spotting the chingling sat by the window at the left of the office, almost hidden behind his own holoscreen.

"As you may be aware," Socket said, steepling her paws together, "I've called you here to run a little errand for me. I do understand you're a mercenary by trade?"

"Yes." Surge resisted the urge to lean back in her seat. "But I'm a little curious as to why you would want to hire a mercenary?"

"You hunt pirates."

The bluntness of her statement almost knocked Surge off her seat.

"I've had a problem lately that needs… correcting." Socket locked her with a sapphire stare. "Lately my databases have been compromised. It started when something was stolen in transit to me."

Surge's spine stiffened but she kept her expression blank as she stared back at the gothitelle. Surely she hadn't traced the hacking back to her? Her paw pads began to sweat and she absently wiped them on her lap.

"I don't know if you've heard about it?" Socket asked.

Surge licked her lips and glanced at the window behind her. "I don't think it's been in the news."

"Oh it has," said Socket. "Although the contents have been kept secret. Just a notification of a theft of government property by a thief I am sure you've heard of. Anyway, what bothers me the most is the data that was taken after. But whether or not the hacker is in contact with the thief is a mystery. He's behind bars now, I've had that dealt with."

Surge let out a long breath. Her decoy number had worked.

"The job I have for you," Socket said as she reached for her note pad, "is to help me retrieve this item of mine and put the pirate Macro behind bars."

"What about the rest of his crew?"

"Oh, you can arrest them if you like, but they're just goons who follow the lead of a psychopath."

"Psychopath?" Surge raised an eyebrow.

"Don't you think so?" Socket's blue eyes widened with surprise. "His list of crimes is immense. Robbery, arson, con artist, monslaughter… to name a few. That doesn't add up to a sane pokemon, does it? And to go so far as to steal government property?"

Surge scratched behind her ear. "I guess."

"Don't you want the job?" Socket worded it as a question, but the warning note behind it chilled Surge to the core.

"I'll take any job so long as it pays."

Socket's lips turned up into a smile and she turned the note pad so Surge could read it.

"Everything is detailed on here," the gothitelle explained. "Your pay, should to you take the job, is the forty thousand credit bounty on Macro's head, plus an extra forty thousand for completing the task. Another twenty thousand will go to Tracer and his group as compensation for loaning you out to me, so you don't have to worry about them for the time being."

"So it totals at one hundred thousand credits?" Surge scratched at her ear again as she read over the details.

"As you can see, I'm desperate to get that mawile behind bars. The item he stole from me contains a tracking chip which you can use to retrieve it. For now, I've called my soldiers off. They have bigger things to be dealing with right now, and I'd like to keep them in reserves, so this all falls on you. I hope that's not an inconvenience?" The gothitelle paid no attention to Surge's apprehensive head shake. "I'll even loan you a laser that will allow you to incapacitate him."

"So a ground laser?" Surge looked up to meet the mayor's eyes.

"I was thinking fire," said Socket. "Will you take the job?"

Surge looked down at the details again. Arrest Macro… she couldn't deny it made her feel sick. But a job was a job, and if she turned it down it would only arouse suspicion from the gothitelle. She needed to cover her tracks, and if she was found out to be the culprit behind harvesting that information…

"I'll take the job," she said.

"Excellent."

Socket unlocked a drawer in her desk and pulled out a red laser module. She slid the slender cylinder towards her and Surge took it, turning it in her paws.

"I trust you're familiar with how those work?" Socket asked.

"Of course." Surge pulled her own laser out of its holster and opened the back, slipping the fire module inside to join the other two it contained.

"Oh, and one other thing." Socket leant forward on her elbows and steepled her paws together again. "Macro is wanted dead or alive. For you, Surge, the full payment stands either way."

Surge looked up with a start. "You mean…?"

"Yes. I imagine that pirate would put up quite a fight." She leant back in her seat and folded her arms. "So if it comes to it, don't be afraid to kill him. You'll still get every last credit."

"But… wouldn't it still be classed as murder?"

Socket shook her head slowly. "We're going to kill him anyway. You'd just be saving the authorities a job. They've got a lot to deal with anyway." She admired her claws and fixed Surge with another chilling smile. "I don't suppose this will be a problem to you?"

Surge's mouth had gone dry. She cleared her throat and slid off her chair.

"No," she said. "I'll get the job done."

"I'm glad to hear it." Socket rose to her feet and moved around her desk to steer Surge from her office. "I'll be in touch to see how things are progressing. Please don't let me down. Tracer could only speak highly of you. I expect your best work."

"One more question," said Surge. "What is this item you want me to retrieve?"

"Just a computer," said Socket. "We'll retrieve it from his ship once he's out of the way. Don't worry yourself."

Just a computer? Surge looked up at the gothitelle, catching another smile off her as she closed the door. A cheerful 'bye!' from the chingling echoed through the woodwork as it closed, blocking the office from sight. A light flashed above her and she looked up at the door, noting the blinking red light of one of the flat, black surveillance cameras.

Her paw went to her laser and she turned from the room, fixing her eyes on the exit. It was just another space pirate round up. It wasn't like she was a stranger to those. Her claw brushed over the smooth trigger and she stormed from the mansion, startling one of the pidgeot as she marched past him down the manicured path.

One hundred thousand credits.

She took a deep, steadying breath as she made a beeline for the gate.

Dead or alive, it was just another round up.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 12

A/N - Sorry for the slightly late update. I didn't get chance yesterday. After a busy day out and a scramble to find our way out of Tokyo Station, by the time we got home it was late and I was shattered! But here it is!

Part Two - Rifts in Time and Space

Chapter Twelve

The sun's rays lit up the sky of Spool City, highlighting the smog a nauseating yellow. The gentle rays warmed Tracer's ears and tail and made him sweat under his trench coat. Widget plodded along beside him, humming a muffled tune beneath his mask. Their journey from Proxy Prison had been somewhat uneventful, only drawing a minor conflict from a group of nidoran and nidorino. A quick blast from his stick had put an end to that no sooner had it started.

He checked the time on his pocket computer, which clouded over with a fine mist. Ten thirty am and a message off Defrag asking what he wanted for breakfast.

Widget came to an abrupt stop and cocked his left ear. Tracer followed his glance to the opposite side of the street. One of the alleyway doors was open and a small pokemon shuffled about behind the trash cans. Or a small group. It was impossible to see. Whatever it was managed to lift an adult skuntank and toss him or her into a skip. A few seconds later, the door slammed shut, leaving the motionless pokemon behind.

"Another one?" Widget asked.

Tracer strolled over to the skip, keeping one ear on the door. The skuntank was well and truly dead and had an awful smell about it -

although skuntank often had an awful smell. The massive skunk's tail was no longer curled over his head in typical skuntank fashion but instead lay draping over the edge of the beaten skip. His mouth was wide open, near impossible to close around all the tumours that lined his gums and tongue.

The delphox reached inside and pulled him out, letting his heavy body fall over his shoulders. Widget visibly grimaced as he glanced up into the skunk pokemon's gaping jaws.

"This is getting ridiculous now," he said. "They know this air can kill them so why do they refuse to wear masks?"

"Not all poison types are stubborn, some just can't afford them." Tracer stumbled out of the alley and followed the road towards his office. "Call Central Meta and tell them to send an ambulance."

"Bit late for that." Widget pressed a paw to his ear piece and his optical display flew into place over his right eye.

"We can't just leave him in a trash can though can we?" Tracer sighed and shook his head. "He's still a pokemon, criminal or not."

"Okay, I get - Yo! Is that Central Meta Hospital?" Widget skipped on ahead of him, his long tail bobbing behind. "Yeah, it's Tracer PI's Agency. We've found another body."

Tracer could almost see the frown on the receptionist's face, and not just at Widget's lack of a telephone manner. The eevee's voice became a drone as Tracer looked over at the passing buildings. Small faces peered out at him, mostly stunky and scraggy, all wearing a mix of concern and anger. Bodies turning up like this were becoming more and more frequent and the outskirts' attitude was beginning to reflect it. Very few of the pokemon living in the slums could afford a half-decent funeral.

Widget looked back over his shoulder, his eyes sparkling. "Said they'll be at our office in a few minutes, so we better make it snappy.

They said to leave him outside and they'll dispose of him safely."

So that meant incineration. At least he wouldn't be left to fester in some skip. Tracer adjusted the skunktank over his shoulders and followed Widget along the empty road. His office wasn't far. Just another turn and it was on his right, sat beside a club that at the present time was closed. His eyes fell on a slogan painted over the worn door of his office and he let out a groan.

'Shove off shamus'.

He'd have loved to think the most unnerving thing about it was the missing comma.

The skuntank's body slipped to the floor and he situated him against the wall out of the way. He looked up and down the street for any sign of an ambulance or disposal truck then ducked into his office as quickly as he could. Cool air blew over him, pushing the smog back outside, and he closed the door and removed his mask. Widget practically shook his off and sent it flying across the room to strike the filing cabinet.

Defrag looked back at them over her shoulder and her nose creased into a frown.

"I took the privilege of fixing this room's filter," she said. "I don't know about you, but I was getting rather tired of breathing that air."

Tracer fired a glance at the humming mechanical monstrosity above the window and dropped into his seat at his computer.

"Dare I ask how much it cost?" he asked.

The lopunny shrugged. "Nothing. I hit it a few times and it started working."

Widget burst out laughing and struck his desk with his paw. "That's genius! I love it!"

"It's temporary," said Defrag. "We should really look at getting it repaired properly. And maybe install an air lock?"

"It'll cost a pretty credit to get someone from the metropolis to look at it," said Tracer. "As for an air lock, don't you think we get enough hate?"

"Well unlike you two I am neither immune, or too old to care."

Tracer looked at her with a start. "I am not old! I'm forty two!"

"Older than me…"

Widget slumped onto his desk in laughter.

"Besides, Widget is not proven immune to the toxic air," said Tracer. "And until we know for certain, he will continue to wear a mask."

The eevee snorted and leant his nose on his forelegs. "Spoil sport."

Tracer fired up his computer then lit up a cigar, puffing smoke into the air which was sucked up by the noisy air filter.

"Did I see you carrying a skuntank?" Defrag asked.

"Yeh. There's been another death." He flicked ash into his ashtray and brought up the outskirts news site. "We're gonna need to be extra vigilant in case the poison types try to rebel again. It's hard enough to contain that to the outskirts as it is, and it will be even more difficult without Surge's help."

"Surge? Has she left us?"

"For now. Socket snatched her up." He leant back in his seat and stifled a sigh. "I've no idea why."

"Pirate hunting, I assume?" said Defrag. "Hunter's been a menace lately and I guess she wants him caught before the entire of System scrambles for his price tag."

"It'd be a short-lived scramble."

"If it gets much higher, there'll surely be casualties? Pokemon will do anything for a quick credit."

Tracer shrugged and scrolled through the news. A soft shuffle outside drew his attention to the window, and he caught the flashing red and blue lights of a medical truck. No siren. Nothing to draw attention to its presence except those lights, and he was fairly certain they only flashed to let him know they'd been.

Like every other 'meaningless event' inside the outskirts, this would be another death swept under the rug. He wouldn't be surprised if soldiers outside Meta City were increased to keep the ruffians out, and that would swiftly be disguised as crowd control by another major event like a battle tournament or a concert.

He blew out a stream of smoke and turned back to his computer screen. The outskirts news website was an underground site that had very little recognition outside the metropolis. It would take all three of them to control any leak of this news to the major sites, confining it only to the underground. They'd take the entire website down if need be, and it wouldn't be for the first time.

…

Macro leant on the dashboard between Anchor and DL, his brows knit together as he looked at the destinations containing the remaining four memory disks. Scanner City had been ticked off, and was certainly one of the most imposing on the list. No where near as imposing as Meta City, however. That disk was unfortunately held inside Socket's own mansion, and several times he'd mulled over whether or not it was worth just getting it out of the way.

The other areas were Binary City, Cyan City, Botnet City and some place called The Cache. All clean, not a single area toxic. Typical locations for government facilities. Well… one would expect, whatever The Cache was. Add in the fact there were five disks and

one had already been retrieved, the list of five remaining locations led him to believe one was a red herring.

"I really can't make up my mind," said Macro.

"I'd suggest Botnet or Binary," said Anchor. "Both are a similar distance from us."

"But Meta is much closer."

"Eh. I don't know about you, but I'd rather save that until last."

"Snap," said Matrix.

"I don't understand why you are doing this," said DL. "Why are these memory disks so important?"

"Did you enjoy your breakfast?" Macro asked.

"Oh I did. It was lovely."

"Then that's why this is important."

DL scratched behind one of her blue ears. "But… what does me enjoying my breakfast have to do with anything? Everyone needs to eat, even living computers."

"Given your roasting of Cookie the other day over only baking sweets," said Macro, "I'd say your drastic change in attitude is evidence enough that these disks actually work."

"Oh… you're correct." She paused and stroked her chin with a claw. "Should I destroy this detrimental data?"

"No!" Anchor and Macro both span to face her.

She took a small step back and clasped her paws together. "Understood. Keeping new files."

"Good grief." Macro rubbed his temples and leant forward on his elbows. "At this rate, she'll end up damaging all our hard work."

"We still have the disk," said Matrix. "If she erases it, then I'll just put it back."

"You can do that?" Macro asked. "You didn't just move the data?"

"I copied it. Takes less time." Matrix wound a paw in his antennae and eyed the pachirisu cautiously. "I guess my laziness paid off, huh?"

Macro licked his lips and looked from the ribombee to DL and then back to his list.

"Well," he said. "I'm not sure if duplicating the data then destroying the disks afterward counts as murder or not… since the original pokemon would have been restored?"

Anchor scratched his mohawk and grunted. "I'm not sure 'bout that either."

"I suppose we can deal with it when the time comes." Macro eyed the city names once more and slammed his paw on the dashboard. "Let's start with Binary City. It's an entertainment district. How hostile can that be?"

"Electric types," said Anchor. "Eh. I guess my gauntlets won't be much use there then, hey?"

"No. We'll only have my ground laser to hand, and that's not great for inner city combat. So let's hope they're not too hostile."

Anchor rolled his eyes in a way that told Macro he knew he'd just fire it off anyway. The mawile huffed and shoved his computer back into his pouch.

"Set co-ordinates for Binary," he told Matrix. "We'll make a start as soon as it gets dark."

"In an entertainment district?" Anchor sniffed. "All right…"

"What? You think we should do it during the daytime?" Macro asked. "The government facility will be teaming with pokemon!"

"And so will the streets at night. And at the moment, if you don't sport the same type that's rampant in those cities, you're gonna get looked at funny. Or worse! And you," he poked Macro in the chest, "have a price on your head."

The mawile shoved his claw aside and frowned. "I know that! But I'd rather deal with civilians than Socket's goons!"

Anchor shrugged and leant back in his seat. "It's your choice. But this is System Ground. I know the reward applies everywhere except Pulse City now, but you've not been safe down there for years. They'll be scrambling just to get at your neck."

Macro snorted and twirled his laser around in his paw. "Let them try."

"Excuse me," said DL. "But this does not sound safe. I suggest you come up with a better solution."

"What? Have them mail the disk to me?"

"If it will make things easier."

Macro mentally smacked his head on the dashboard. "Look. This is the best way to retrieve that disk. So we're going to infiltrate the facility in Binary City at night time when there are less soldiers manning the building!"

"In before Socket raises night time security," said Matrix.

Macro closed his eyes and shrugged. "She wouldn't do that. She'd have to pay out more wages. And she's no idea when or where we're going to strike next."

"All right." Anchor adjusted himself in his seat and tugged the steering stick, turning the ship almost a full one-eighty. "Night time raid on Binary City it is."

Wildcard Gamma chugged through the sky and Macro kicked his feet up on the dashboard, watching the fluffy clouds roll by below them. Far on the horizon, he could make out the edge of one of the tri-cities, but which one it was he couldn't say. He was fairly certain it wasn't Cyan City, since that was well off their radar. That just left Magenta or Luma.

DL shifted beside him and a flicker of blue light drew his attention. The antennae behind her right ear flickered erratically and she fixed a blank stare on the far window.

"Obtaining information from the BackDoor network," she said.

Macro raised an eyebrow. "Eh?"

"TimeSkip has awakened." She placed a paw on the back of his seat. "Updating."

The pachirisu's grip slackened on his seat as her pupils dilated and he had to grab hold of her wrist to stop her from slumping to the floor. Her antennae flickered blue and a tiny orange light lit up in the center. He looked up at his crew mates who watched the pachirisu with concern and, in Matrix's case, fascination.

"Updating?" Macro gasped.

"Yeh…" said Matrix. "I didn't know she could do that."

"Neither did I! What does that mean?"

"I think," said Anchor as he scratched his head, "that it means we have a direct connection to whatever this BackDoor nonsense is."

"My urge to snoop is tingling," said Matrix.

"We're not snooping!" Macro tugged on her arm, pulling her up so she was leaning on his chair. "Whatever BackDoor is, it's just further evidence that Socket is a psycho."

His heart lurched into his chest and he warred with the urge to just let DL collapse to the floor. Somehow he'd forgotten she was linked to some unheard-of network that solely existed to tear holes in time and space. His knowledge of it still felt like a dream and the eeriness was dragging him back in to that living nightmare.

DL straightened and let her paw relax over the back of his chair. "Update complete. TimeSkip connection installed."

The three space pirates eyed her cautiously and Macro cleared his throat and looked back out of the window. He had no desire to learn what TimeSkip was and he desperately wanted to forget the whole thing had even happened. He placed a paw to his chest, trying to calm his racing heart.

"Cap'n?" Anchor's brow furrowed. "You all right?"

"I'm fine." Macro's voice came out embarrassingly shaky. He cleared his throat and kicked his feet back up onto the dashboard. "Just keep flying."

…

Socket stood beside the sparksurfer raichu scientist, eyeing the green onion-like android curiously. It looked like it was merely sleeping, its large head lolling against its chest. A pair of bug-like wings that looked much too small to carry it sprouted from its back, almost matching the long antennae above a pair of large eyes. Was it a bug, plant or mammal? She couldn't even begin to explain it. All she knew was it was a mere android that bore the same abilities as the extinct pokemon it was meant to represent.

"Are you sure this is what a celebi looked like?" she asked the raichu.

Yobi looked up from his personal computer long enough to give her a reassuring nod. "We scoured several text books and fossil records. I can tell you for certain we're on point."

"It just doesn't look like the colourful character from my childhood picture books," she said.

"Picture books tend to make caricatures of extinct specimens, Madam Mayor. I can assure you this is the closest you're gonna get to an actual representation of a celebi without resurrecting one from a fossil."

"Is that possible?"

"Maybe one day."

He pushed a paw into the touch screen's display of a green button and the small bug-like onion mammal lifted its large head. A pair of glassy black eyes flickered open and fixed emotionlessly on the two pokemon.

"Does it speak?" Socket asked.

"Nah. No vocal chords. It's only way of communication is via code through the network." Yobi brought up a detailed map of System Sky on his computer. "Unlike BackDoor, who has turned out to be rather chatty, this one will merely send co-ordinates to the time pockets it's intended to seek out. Then BackDoor will join it and tear them open."

"I thought celebi could travel through time themselves. Why does it need BackDoor to do its job?"

"Celebi could, allegedly. But we can't emulate that." The look on the raichu's chubby face told her he wanted to add something else that may have resulted in him being tossed telekinetically across the room. "This should work. We'll have a bigger chance of scouring deeper into time pockets with TimeSkip's help."

The gothitelle scratched her nose as she stared down at the odd little android. A time traveler that couldn't time travel. It seemed a little pointless. She let out a sigh and moved her paw to her hip as she shifted her weight onto one foot.

"All right. Wire it up to the network and send it out there," she said. "We'll see exactly what this 'TimeSkip' can do."

The warning note in her voice made the raichu's spine stiffen and he instinctively hopped up onto his tail to hover above the ground. His yellow cheeks turned a deep crimson and he masked his embarrassment behind his computer as he punched in a complicated code Socket couldn't even be bothered to try to understand.

"Give it a few minutes," he said. "I'm just connecting it now."

The blinking antennae behind the celebi's right antennae flickered blue and orange and the android became even more still than it was previously. Socket watched boredly as its large pupils moved forward like a telescope. Then they snapped back and the celebi rose into the air on its tiny wings, buzzing with all the ferocity of a yanmega. It turned and zipped towards the window.

Yobi let out a yelp and beat the android to it, throwing it wide open. The celebi soared past him, making a sharp turn towards the sky. Yobi pressed his back against the wall and slid down it, his chest rising and falling like a pair of bellows.

"Quick thinking," said Socket. "If that thing had smashed my window, I was going to dock your pay."

The raichu met her eyes and a flash of panic lit up behind them. She tucked her paws behind her back and strolled from the room. It was about time for a cup of chesto coffee.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 13

Chapter Thirteen

Macro couldn't even think in straight lines. His mind kept drifting to the updates DL had received. It wasn't simply the eeriness that surrounded Socket's probing into time and space that bothered him, but his mind had leapt to the assumption they could send something to her to remove her memories again. Of course, without something to store them on then it would be classified as murder. They had no idea Matrix was merely copying the files to her brain, which Macro felt was basically cloning her but that was a matter to worry over for a different day.

What bothered him the most was things no longer felt secure. He felt even less secure about the flickering dot that kept appearing just outside their radar, and his mind was reeling. Socket clearly must want the pachirisu back? She wouldn't happily leave her 'living computer' in the paws of a pirate?

He gnawed on a claw as he glanced over to Matrix's navigation screen. The ribombee was sat with his head resting on his arms, sprawled out before the screen and watching the red dot as it drifted off their radar yet again.

"Are we any closer to Binary City?" Macro asked.

"We're close," said Matrix. "But I'm apprehensive to let you leave with that other ship tailing us."

"Fire at it?"

"I'm not happy with that either, especially since the last time a ship followed us, it saved our hides."

DL made a thoughtful noise. "I do not recall that event."

"You were in your box," said Anchor.

"I see." She nodded slowly. "Then it would be unwise of me to offer advise on this situation."

"You have advice?" Macro asked, rather more surprised than he'd have liked to have sounded.

DL turned her head to look at him. "Oh yes. I'm equipped to plan out tactics to deal with complex situations."

"Oh really?" He narrowed his eyes slightly and let his paw drop to his lap. "Then go ahead. What's your advice?"

"Well… when you leave the ship, you always leave Matrix and Cookie on board. So if you were to disembark, then you'd be spread out. The ship would be able to be defended, and you two would be smaller targets. If someone were to plan an attack, they wouldn't be able to target all of you."

"Huh. I'd never thought of it like that."

"That surprises me, to be honest."

Macro flashed his canines in a scowl. "Is that a jab at my intelligence?"

He chose to ignore the snort that came from Anchor, instead keeping the pachirisu's oddly honest eyes locked on his.

"I am not equipped to calculate your intelligence," she said. "But it does seem like common sense to me."

"Well, maybe you've not noticed but Matrix isn't exactly the best at ship combat," said Macro. "He's my navigator. Anchor is the one who deals with combat."

He gestured a paw towards the granbull who merely shrugged.

"I do my best," he said.

"Then my next assessment," said DL, "is that you take Matrix or myself and leave Anchor to deal with the ship."

"No way!" Macro raised his paws and shook his head. "I know Matrix can kick tail if he wanted to, but like I said. He's my navigator. As for you, since Socket clearly wants to retrieve you, you stay on board."

"That isn't a bad thing," said DL. "I was made for Socket after all."

Macro let out a derisive snort. "You have so much to learn, DL."

"I am equipped with encyclopedias that cover ninety eight percent of System's history and biology," she said. "What makes you say I have a lot to learn?"

He raised an eyebrow and his jaw fell open slightly. Even Anchor's expression reflected his own. With a sigh, he ran a paw over his scar.

"If you're designed to be connected to BackDoor," he said, "then why did she feel the need to fill your head with encyclopedias?!"

"Convenience, I assume."

"This just solidifies my theory that you're a glorified toy." He let out a small growl. "Someone needs to kick that gothitelle from one end of System to the next."

"That is a rather violent solution," said DL.

"It was a metaphor."

"Then may I suggest a less violent one for you?"

Matrix chuckled and Macro shot him a glare. The ribombee diverted his attention back to the navigation screen and pushed himself back into his seat.

"I agree with DL," he said. "You two should just disembark and go looking for the next disk. If she's equipped to deal with complex situations, then maybe she can work out your weapons system?"

The pachirisu nodded. "That sounds like a sound solution to this dilemma."

Macro grit his teeth together and swiveled in his seat to face the windscreen. "Fine! Anchor, show her the ropes. Then we'll drop down into Binary. Matrix." He pointed a claw at the navigator. "Get us as close to the government facility as possible."

Matrix nodded and turned back to his screen, bringing up a smaller window to key in the co-ordinates. He let out a small 'huh' and gave the mawile a sideways glance.

"I believe," he began, "that this facility is actually a huge entertainment centre. Cinema screens, gaming arcades, clubs."

"So it's not offices?" Macro asked.

"It's not clear if they even exist, but if they do they're upstairs. I'll send the map to you and you'll see what I mean." His tiny paws flew across the holoscreen and Macro's computer beeped. "I used to go to Binary City a lot as a hatchling, and if I'm right then this is one of the places I used to frequent."

Macro brought the map up on his optical display and groaned. Matrix wasn't wrong. The facility was huge and contained a multiplex, gaming arcade and even a club or two. Even if he'd wanted to avoid guards at night, there were still going to be obstacles as soon as they stepped paw into the facility.

Anchor nudged him with an elbow. "Hey. Look on the bright side. At least you don't have to pick any locks."

…

Binary City was lit up with bright lights from street lamps to flashing neon signs over casinos and arcades. Music blared from doorways and hidden speakers, each one advertising each individual entertainment centre. Electric pokemon swarmed in the streets, moving from one attraction to the next, oblivious to the two space pirates. Macro nimbly dodged a flaafy clutching a large plush chinchou under one arm as he tried to keep up with his larger ampharos brother. The mawile felt static spread through his horn as it briefly brushed the flaafy's wool and he reached around to beat it away to no avail. It had already caused his thick, yellow fur to stand on end, making him look like a jolteon hybrid.

"Don't draw attention to yourself, Cap'n." The granbull's voice drew Macro's eye to him.

Anchor looked over the various signs and animated billboards and his muzzle crinkled slightly at the animation loop of a lopunny swinging a pair of nunchaku above the door to a combat centre. Seeing pokemon using weapons wasn't unusual given the current state of society, but seeing it shown so boldly, animated or not, was a blatant smack in the face to the government authorities who wanted to ban such things. Considering Binary City held a massive government facility made it unclear whether or not it was a rebellious attitude or mere pokemon type favoritism. After his experience with the electric army at the unnamed building they'd found DL, he was leaning towards the latter.

Yelps and flashes of electricity filled the combat centre and Macro thought he heard the tell-tale whoosh of a water laser firing.

The busy road ended at the entranceway to a huge towering building that spread out on either side to merge with the buildings around it. The top half was filled with small windows that suggested they were either office blocks or apartments. The bottom half's windows were filled with posters or replaced with animated billboards - the kind that let light in but didn't let light out and thus destroy the display. Either way, each poster made it clear what the stores contained. Games

arcades, trading card arenas, casinos, combat tournament rooms, clubs, karaoke bars… the list went on.

But right beside the door stood a poster with red text contrasting over a yellow back ground. 'Binary City is a peaceful district. Leave all conflicts to the police force. Breaking this rule will result in a ten thousand credit fine.'

Anchor snorted. "Maybe this won't be as tough a job as I was fearing."

Despite the sign's 'reassurance', Macro still felt somewhat uneasy.

They slipped through the door past an overweight electivire enjoying a triple scoop ice cream cone and entered what could only be described as utter chaos. If they'd had any fear pokemon might target them and turn them in, it was swiftly washed away. Electric and normal type pokemon bustled in all directions, many unable to make up their minds where to visit first. Much to his surprise, a few other pokemon types flowed around the building, their large eyes taking in everything it had to offer, paying no heed to any other passers by. Stores displaying panels of the latest collectible cards were surrounded by hatchlings and adults alike. The shrill voice of a tiny eevee begging his jolteon father for the priciest promo card could be heard over the rumble of voices and Macro grit his teeth together. Those games had always gone over his head. Each new set was just another con to draw money out of the most adoring of fans. The fact they could be played on VR machines was an immense feat, and he caught the glimpse of one over the shoulders of a pack of elekid and pikachu watching their sentret friend while a pair of pom-pom oricorio cheered them on.

Macro found the nearest escalator and stood on the moving stairs, watching the crowd shrink below him. Modern electro-pop music boomed from a casino on his right and he let out an involuntary squeak. A holographic chansey waved at him from the doorway, waving a sign that said 'boost your chance with happy hour'. The music fizzled out and the egg-shaped pokemon closed her eyes and

hopped from foot to foot before vanishing into thin air. He turned his back on the door and wound towards the next escalator. The obnoxious music started up again, this time with a different tune, and he caught sight of a holographic meowth tossing coins into the air. Once again, the same sign for 'happy hour' flashed above its head showering the pokemon with golden credits.

"This life doesn't appeal to me at all," Macro muttered to Anchor.

The pink bulldog pokemon nodded and folded his arms, watching the stores drift by. Neon lights flashed across his purple mohawk, tinting it with all the colours of the rainbow.

Macro distracted himself by bringing up the map, subtly so as not to draw attention to himself (although that wasn't exactly difficult since everyone else's attention was on the various amusements). The next disk was held in one of the smaller rooms, but it was difficult to work out what exactly they were. Once again, it was locked away. That was all it said. Locked away. No indication whether it was a safe or merely locked behind a door. The room it was located in was on the third floor. That meant they needed to ride up another escalator.

The second floor was filled with clubs which Macro felt was a bit unfair to those that didn't have the privilege of living in one of the upstairs luxury apartments and would likely be dragging themselves home after a night out.

The two space pirates faltered slightly before the next escalator. Very few pokemon were using it, and most of the ones that were came down from the one that ran parallel to it. Macro stepped aside as a furret shot past him to head up the stairs, laughing as she threw an apology at an electabuzz over her shoulder. The yellow and black mammal shook his head and leant against the wall of the glass elevator. He fixed the two space pirates with an amused smile and shrugged.

"Women, eh?" he said.

Anchor grunted with agreement and looked after the furret. "Aye."

"She'd forget her tail if it weren't attached." The large electric type frowned slightly and his eye drifted to Macro. "Do I know you?"

"Nope." Macro tugged at Anchor's paw and steered him towards the escalator. "We're new to this establishment."

"Huh." The electabuzz folded his arms and smirked. "Well, you should join us for a drink at Chatty Chatot's later. You seem like just her type."

Macro hid a grimace behind a smirk of his own and tugged Anchor after him with a mutter of 'maybe later'. Once they were out of the electabuzz's view, he let out a sigh of relief. Thankfully that stripy beast hadn't recognised him from a wanted poster.

He threw open the door at the top of the stairs and strolled out into open air. He blinked his violet eyes in amazement and stared aghast at a stretch of false grass dotted with round plastic tables each one sporting a vibrant sun umbrella. A pair of meowth and a skitty eyed them curiously then returned to their conversation as they enjoyed their tall, pink drinks. Macro stood aside once more as the furret rushed passed him again to return to her friend.

From the outside, he hadn't seen this balcony. That meant it must have been at the back of the building, hidden from view of the shopping and entertainment streets. His eye wandered to the buildings around them, all of which looked like apartment and office blocks. Although a few of them sported their own posters and bright, animated billboards. Shrill screams reached his ears, almost drowned out by the city noise, and he trotted over to the balcony edge and looked down into the streets. This area of the city was much more suburban and he spotted a group of electric type pokemon standing around a wide river that fed a lake perched in the entertainment centre's vibrant yet fake garden. A galvantula tugged on an electric web, dragging it out of the water with the help of his bipedal allies. The water dwellers held inside the net flailed and

splashed as electricity coursed through their bodies, their vibrant, colourful fins waving in protest. Macro flinched and turned away, clearing his throat as he tried to dispel the wretched image.

Anchor's paw fell heavily on his shoulder and he briefly looked up at his large friend.

"Let's see where we're meant to be going then, hey?" he said.

He checked his map again and let out a small groan. The room was on this floor… that meant the disk was held in someone's apartment.

That meant this building didn't hold a single office room. Whoever was in charge of the disk both worked for Socket and lived in Binary City. He frowned slightly as he took in the various apartments and their communal garden. He could only have dreamt of being able to afford a place like this.

He strolled across the balcony, the fake grass soft on his paws like a carpet. Once they were out of ear shot of the three cat pokemon, he looked up at Anchor and shook his head.

"We need to get into one of these rooms," he said quietly.

Anchor's ears pricked up with surprise and he looked over at each of the clean, white, numbered doors. Some of them even had hanging baskets filled with silk or painted metal flowers. Real flowers hadn't grown in System for such a long time that owning real ones was a luxury even for the most wealthy of pokemon.

His map told him the disk was held in the sixth room along. He counted them as he passed and hesitated outside room number twenty six. So much for not needing to pick locks.

"Oi!"

Macro froze and glanced to the side. The voice had sounded oddly robotic. A deep hum of electricity rose to a crescendo and he spotted

the metal squat sphere of a magnezone floating towards him with all the speed of a jet. A pack of magnemite and magneton bobbed along beside him and he drifted to a halt behind Macro and Anchor.

Living metal. One of few pokemon that looked like they'd been crafted by pokemon, but they weren't remotely androids. Like every other pokemon they had internal organs, although these consumed electricity rather than fruit or meat. They had no mouths to speak of, so all their vocalisations came from a hidden speaker on their bodies.

The magnezone narrowed his eyes and aimed his magnets forwards. They were much too big for an ordinary magnezone. Some enhancement he'd had… Macro felt a tug on the steel in his horn. He locked his legs and frowned back at the magnezone.

"What's your problem?" he growled.

"We've been alerted to two space pirates roaming the premises," the magnezone explained. "My records tell me it is you two. Hunter and one of his crew from Wildcard Gamma. We're to take you into custody."

Macro stifled a chuckle but a small smirk tugged at his lips. "So you're the fuzz? Except… not very fuzzy?"

The magnezone's eyes narrowed into slits and he increased the pull on his magnets. Macro felt his feet leave the floor and Anchor grabbed him around his waist before he flew into the floating police 'mon's grasp.

"There's no sense in resisting," the magnezone droned. "You're wanted dead or alive. Even if we just have to take your head, we will."

The surrounding magnemite and magneton span in the air, generating an electromagnetic field that almost pulled Anchor off his

feet. Macro let out a shrill scream as it tugged on his horn, dragging him closer and closer to the magnezone.

These wretched electric types. His ground laser was useless against magnezone and its family. Their ability to levitate completely countered their weakness to it. He grit his teeth together and tried to catch Anchor with a glare.

"Do something!" he roared.

"If I let go of you, you'll be whisked away!" The granbull tightened his grip on the mawile's waist. "Although I'm a bit worried you're gonna get torn in two at this rate…"

The magnezone muttered something that to Macro was incoherent electronic babble and edged closer to him, grabbing his horn in his magnets. The mawile found himself tugged into the air, wrenching him clean from Anchor's grip. The pink bulldog cursed loudly and looked around for something to strike the hovering hunk of metal with. But there was nothing. At this height, Anchor couldn't even strike the magnezone with a fire fang. All he could do was watch helplessly as Macro was lifted away and the other magnet pokemon moved in to surround him, their bodies sparking maliciously.

…

Surge ducked behind the edge of the apartment housing, her laser clasped in one paw. The magnezone officer had lifted Macro off the ground, holding the flailing mawile two feet over Anchor's head. The poor granbull's body jerked as electricity coursed through him.

If the magnezone apprehended the space pirates then she wouldn't see a single credit. She pulled the laser towards her chest and watched the officers as they did her job for her. The police force, even though linked to Socket, were a separate entity from the Mayor's officials. She controlled soldiers, not the police. If Surge interfered, then it wouldn't go too heavily against her.

After all, she had been asked.

All she had to do was catch every single one of them in a blast. If she hit Macro, she hit the magnezone, and took out a chunk of the smaller magnets in the process.

She aimed her laser, keeping both eyes open and locking them on the frantic mawile. She'd heard every word the giant magnet pokemon had said. Dead or alive. They'd have pulled him apart to get the bounty if they had to, but fortunately it hadn't come to that. His long, yellow fur billowed around him, revealing his slim black legs as he frantically kicked at the magnezone. The sight made her feel sick to the stomach. She pressed a claw to the trigger and the trim of her laser lit up red. Dead or alive…

Her heat lurched into her throat and she shifted her aim, pushing hard on the trigger. A flash of red shot from it, lighting the white walls up with an orange glow. The laser seared through the magnemite and magneton before it engulfed the magnezone, melting his hull away. A deep, electronic screech filled the air and she pressed her paws over her ears, ducking back behind the wall. The magnezone crashed to the ground along with several of his crew, and the remaining smaller magnets buzzed as they shot blindly back through the door to the escalator or flocked over the balcony to the streets below.

Her mouth was dry as she looked back over her shoulder at the massacre. Macro stood beside the fallen magnezone, his violet eyes wide as he looked from the molten pokemon to the direction the attack had come from. She could even see his shoulders rising and falling as he tried to catch his breath. She flinched away from the sight and stuffed her laser back into her belt. Her heart was racing and she placed a paw to her chest, taking steady breaths to try and calm it.

She couldn't do it… she couldn't shoot him. Yet she'd so easily taken down the police officer. She let her head fall into her paws and

screamed silently into her lap. Shoot the criminal, claim the bounty. It was a simple job. What had got into her?

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 14

Chapter Fourteen

The magneton police officer had been reduced to a molten mass. One of his magnets still rotated, although Macro wasn't sure if that was more to do with his inner mechanisms still ticking away or if he was somehow still alive. One thing was for certain. Whatever had hit him wasn't an attack from a fire pokemon. There had been no flames in that beam. It was definitely from a laser. But who would have rescued him?

The mawile grit his teeth together and clenches his fists so tightly his claws dug into his paw pads. Whoever had shot the magnet pokemon had likely killed him. That was murder and it would likely fall on his head since he was stood right next to him, completely unscathed (save for a little electrocution.)

"Did you see who did it?" he asked Anchor.

The granbull shook his head. "No. But we need to get rid of the bodies otherwise this place is gonna panic. It only takes one pokemon to send the entire building into an uproar."

"Good plan." Macro moved over to the door and pulled out his lock pick. "Just keep an eye open in case someone's competing over us."

Anchor grunted a noncommittal reply, but Macro didn't see his reaction. He shuffled away under the weight of one of the metal bodies and soon a huge splash emanated from the lake below. Macro eyed his lock pick and turned to where he expected to see a lock, but instead was greeted with a key card panel.

"Darn rich pokemon." He reached into his pouch and pulled out his pocket computer. "Not had to use this method in a while."

The application was simple enough to launch, but holding the computer steady while it streamed incoherent code over the screen was another thing entirely. He kept his back to Anchor and one eye on the doors next to him. Cheerful feminine voices rose over the silence and Macro's heart lurched into his throat. He looked back at Anchor to see him tossing the last of the magnemite over the edge of the balcony to plummet into the lake. He hoped desperately its falling steel carcass hadn't hit any of the water dwellers. The grass where they'd been lying had been burnt completely away, revealing concrete slabs beneath it.

Three dainty pokemon turned the corner - a flaafy, buneary and dedenne - and they eyed the granbull curiously as he stood with his back to Macro, obscuring the mawile from view. The dedenne eyed the grass and whispered something that went unheard to her two friends.

Anchor craned his head back slightly to shout at the door, "Come on, man! They'll be out of watmel cider at this rate!"

The three pokemon raised their eyebrows at him and the flaafy covered her mouth and snickered as they strolled past towards the escalator.

Macro tutted and shook his head. "You think they serve watmel cider in a place like this?"

"It was the fanciest drink I could think of," Anchor grumbled.

The door jerked open and a stocky pikachu stared back at them then looked from Macro to the small computer tablet hovering over his card key panel. His face melted from confusion to fear then anger in an instant. Macro grinned and let out a nervous laugh.

"What's goin' on here?!" the electric mouse shouted in a voice oddly deep for his size.

"Routine room check," said Anchor.

Before the pikachu could reach for a small laser perched on a shelf beside the door, Anchor's large paw swung down past Macro's face to strike the pikachu between the ears. The rodent's tongue poked out from between his lips and he crumpled to the ground. The laser skittered across the laminated floor to vanish beneath a squat sofa. Anchor rubbed his fist with his other paw.

"You really can't touch these pokemon without getting a static shock, can you?" he grumbled.

Macro stepped carefully over the fallen pikachu and scanned the room. It was immaculately tidy down to the coffee table that sported an open can of soda perched on a rubber coaster. The wall mounted television was still on, playing a teenage soap drama and the music coming from it was enough to depress Macro there and then. He reached for the remote, perched neatly on the arm of a leather arm chair, and switched it off before setting the remote back in place.

"Now…" He turned and looked around the room. "If I were an important, confidential disk hiding in someone's apartment… where would I be?"

"Not in a safe," said Anchor. "'Cos it doesn't look like this guy has one."

Macro peered under the arm chair cushion, revealing nothing more than a few crumbs. He dropped onto all-fours and checked beneath the chair. Nothing.

"I'll check the bedroom," said Anchor. "Might be in his drawer of ties and scarves or something."

Macro muttered his acknowledgment and rose to his feet to look around the room again. The glass topped coffee table was very inconspicuous and sported no hiding places. He scurried across the room, checking over the movie shelves that adorned the wall beside the television. It would take a long time to go through every single

case and he decided to leave that as a last resort and continue his search for a secure place the pikachu might have hidden the disk.

He paused to remove two photos from the wall one by one, half expecting to find a hidden safe but he ended up being bitterly disappointed. It never was that simple in real life.

"Nothin' in there." Anchor strolled from the bedroom and held out his paw. "Found this tiny key in his drawers though. Thought whatever it was for might have been stored under the bed, but all he had under there was folded up gym equipment."

Macro took the key and eyed it curiously. It was ridiculously small. Much too small for Anchor to have used with his massive paws.

"It must be for something," said Macro. "I'll keep having a look around. You go through all his movie boxes perchance he's hidden it in there."

Anchor looked over at the spread of shelves and let out a long whistle. "Quite the movie buff, eh?"

The granbull strolled over to it and plucked the first one from the shelf while Macro continued his hunt around the apartment. It wasn't unreasonable to suspect the pikachu might have hidden the disk inside one of those cases. Movies were all on small disks these days, far out-dating the use of USBs, and they looked very similar to the ones DL's memories were stored on. However, Macro didn't want to sit and go through every single box without first exhausting every other possible hideyhole.

The mawile opened and closed cupboards and drawers in the kitchen, revealing nothing more than crockery, silver utensils and cleaning equipment. Despite the amount of plates, cups and glasses, the refrigerator was oddly bare. Just a bottle of oran juice and a block of moomoo cheese. He let it close of its own accord and turned back to the living room. Surely he'd missed something…

He gave a glance to Anchor who was sat cross-legged on the floor opening one case after the next and decided to re-check the bedroom. There had to be something they'd overlooked.

The bedroom was just as tidy as the rest of the apartment and one wouldn't even have noticed Anchor had gone through it. Macro checked through the drawers again, finding nothing more than ties, scarves and a pair of virtual reality goggles. His eye drifted over to the bedside table which contained only a pocket computer and a coaster. The computer was kept safely inside a leather sleeve. He scooped it up and tried to open it, failing as it latched on a hidden lock.

"Aha!" A grin split across his face.

He brushed over the front of the case, removing the near invisible circle leather flap from the tiny keyhole. The little key fit inside perfectly and with one turn, the lock snapped open. The LCD screen lit up as soon as the cover left it, showing a female pikachu standing amid a cherry blossom rain. There was nothing suspicious at first glance. The inside cover contained pockets that little sheets of paper poked from. Macro pulled them out carefully one by one, but they were nothing more than notes and website passwords. As he pulled out the final one, something fell from it and landed on the bed. A small, square disk that once again had nothing written on it. His heart leapt into his throat and he scooped it up with a cheer.

"I've got it!" he said as he bolted back into the living room.

Anchor looked up from his nest of movie cases and raised his eyebrows.

"Oh good," he said. "I'll just put all these back then message Matrix."

Macro joined him, stuffing the movies back onto the shelf as neatly as he could. The pikachu was already beginning to stir and he rubbed a yellow paw across his head.

"Don't worry about being immaculate," said Anchor. "He had them in alphabetical order and I ain't messing with that. He knows we were here, and he'll have the headache to prove it."

The granbull grabbed Macro in one paw and he yelled in protest as he was clutched to the large pokemon's chest. Anchor leapt over the pikachu and made for the little outdoor dining area. It was completely empty now. The meowth and skitty that had occupied it previously had long since left. Even their glasses had been cleared away.

The two space pirates looked up at the sky, searching for the hull of Wildcard Gamma amongst the spread of white, fluffy clouds. Some of them showed a tint of grey, threatening to pelt System Ground with rain.

"Oi!" The pikachu staggered over to them, his red cheeks sparking fiercely.

A chill ran down Macro's spine and he stiffened, looking from the yellow rodent to the sky and back. "Hurry up, Matrix!"

He heard the flash of the beam ladder before the blue schooling wishiwashi came into view through the heavy clouds. His eyes remained fixed on the sparking pikachu rushing at them with his paws balled into fists. The electric rodent's feet hammered the floor as he launched himself towards them, electricity spreading all along his fur as he readied a volt tackle.

Anchor grabbed Macro by the horn and yanked him upwards as he kicked off the balcony towards the beam ladder. His large paw grabbed the bottom rung and he threw Macro up towards the next one. The pikachu roared and sent out a stream of electricity towards the two pokemon. It caught Macro just as his claws fastened over the rung and every muscle in his body locked as it coursed through him. It didn't last long but it was enough to make him realise he never wanted to be hit by a thunderbolt on the ground. He spotted the pikachu seething and waving his fists but he vanished from view as Wildcard Gamma rose back into the clouds.

…

Matrix looked up at the two pirates and a smirk spread over his lips. "Nice hair do."

Macro absently smoothed down his prickly fur to no avail and scowled. "Shut up, Matrix."

"I take it that pikachu zapped you?" The ribombee turned back to his navigation screen and tapped in co-ordinates that meant nothing to Macro.

"What makes you ask that?" he scoffed.

Despite the pikachu's attack, the only effect it had left behind was an uncontrollable static that made his fur stick out like a frightened jolteon's. No amount of smoothing was going to sort it out any time soon. DL eyed him curiously and he could almost see her looking over different solutions to his staticky problem.

He turned back to Matrix and frowned at the radar screen. "Did you have any problems with our stalker? Any surprise attacks?"

"Nope, none," said Matrix. "They vanished, actually. We've not seen them since."

"I never had to use the ship's weapons," said DL. "But at least I now know how to use them should we face any problems in the future."

"Fantastic," said Macro.

"Did you manage to get the disk?" Matrix asked.

"Of course we got the disk."

"Good." Matrix fixed him out of the corner of his eye and smirked. "Otherwise your new plush toy hairdo would be in vain, right?"

Macro slammed the disk down beside him and fixed his violet eyes on the smaller pokemon's black ones. The ribombee didn't so much as flinch. He took the disk and reached for his computer.

"Okay, DL." Macro turned to the pachirisu. "Matrix is going to install more data into you. You're gonna let him do it."

She blinked a couple of times then nodded. "Okay. If that is what you wish."

She took the cable and plugged it in herself, then sat down at Matrix's feet. The little bug pokemon fired up the disk and once again her pupils expanded until they took over most of her large, chocolate eyes. It wasn't as alarming as the first time, but it still made Macro feel anxious. If something went wrong, she would probably be irreparable. He leant against the back of his seat on one elbow, keeping his full attention on DL. Seeing her sat there like that, she really did seem artificial. If he hadn't had confirmation she actually was a living, breathing pokemon he'd have wondered if he'd been mistaken.

Finally, her eyes returned to normal and she blinked once. Twice. Then stood up, the cable still fastened into the back of her skull. She turned her head left and right, looking around the cockpit as though she'd never seen it before in her life. A look of confusion spread across her face and her chocolate eyes widened slightly.

"Where am I?" she asked.

Macro raised an eyebrow and pushed himself away from his seat. "Wildcard Gamma. The same place you've been for several nights now."

"Wildcard Gamma…"

She spoke the word as though she was tasting it, staring blankly at the floor. Then she looked up at him and he took a step back. It wasn't a blank, unreadable stare, or the curious look of a lifeless

android. It was one of worry. Someone who wanted answers. Someone who truly had no idea where she was or who she was with.

"I'm sorry," she said as she took a step towards him. "I don't-"

The cable went taught and she reached a paw around to the back of her head, feeling over the jack lead. Her eyes became impossibly wide and the skin beneath her white fur lost every trace of colour. She let out a scream and crumpled to the floor, where she was promptly sick. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she lay sprawled on cockpit floor.

Macro took another step back, more so to avoid getting any vomit on his fur. But he couldn't take his eyes off her. Yes, the disk had worked, but he couldn't help feeling responsible that he was the one who'd done this to her. This terrified pachirisu was partly his fault…

Anchor leapt to his feet. "I'll go and get the mop bucket."

The granbull raced from the cockpit towards the wash room, narrowly avoiding Matrix as he maneuvered around DL's unconscious body. Macro caught the ribombee's eye and he glanced from DL and back while winding his antennae around one paw.

"I think we need to get her to her room," Matrix said.

Macro nodded stiffly and stooped to remove the cable from her skull. With Matrix's help, they both managed to lift her and carry her down the corridor.

"I think we can safely say the disks work," said Matrix.

"Yeh." Macro tried to avoid looking at DL, instead intently focusing on moving backwards towards her room. "But I'm starting to wonder if that's really a good thing."

…

It was already dark by the time Tracer and Widget reached Binary City. The entire rear of the prestigious entertainment centre had been cordoned off, and the delphox leant against one of the bollards as he puffed on his cigar.

Paramedics were still busting around as they lifted the metal bodies into the ambulance, but Tracer was convinced they'd be well and truly dead by now.

Melted.

The magnezone officer and his small fleet of magneton and magnemite had been melted. A sudden blast of heat that he assumed would have come from a laser. Even a flareon's flamethrower didn't get hot enough to melt a pokemon in one flash like that. But from what he'd been told, there'd been no damage to the surrounding structures to suggest it had been a prolonged attack, so the officials had written it off as a sudden blast of heat. Tracer completely agreed with them.

He removed his cigar to flick ash onto the cobbled floor, watching as the last of the melted steel types were tossed unceremoniously into the back of the ambulance.

"Grim, eh?" said Widget.

"That's an understatement if ever I've heard one," said Tracer.

"And they've no idea who did it?"

"Oh, they have an idea." Tracer took another drag on his cigar. "A pikachu said his apartment got raided by Hunter and one of his goons. They swatted him before he could even act."

"So they think it's him?" Widget's tattoo crinkled as he frowned. "I didn't think he had a fire laser."

"That's not to say he hasn't acquired one."

"But he doesn't need one, does he?"

"His trademark attacks wouldn't work on a magnezone. So I'm not ruling it out."

"And why toss them into a lake?" Widget asked. "Didn't he practically lead a protest against 'murdering' water dwellers five years ago?"

"I don't know why you're using air quotes when you're against them being used for food yourself."

Widget shrugged. "It's a grey area."

"Well. If he needed to hide them quickly…" The delphox looked up at the balcony three floors above them. "Then throwing them into the lake is the easiest way to go about it."

"I would've just bust a door down and tossed them into some random apartment," said Widget.

Tracer eyed his wagging tail and shook his head. "I hope desperately that's just a fictitious scenario you're dreaming up."

"Of course it is."

"Let's have a check over the balcony, shall we? They might have missed something."

Widget leapt to his feet and followed Tracer across the park towards the building. A bibarel stood aside from the door to let him inside. He wasn't sure why a bibarel would have been called out with the paramedics since there hadn't actually been a fire, but he guessed it was best to play it safe just in case. The beaver pokemon frowned slightly and stretched out his paw towards Tracer's cigar.

The delphox stared at it for a moment then stubbed it out on the wall before tossing it into the nearest trash can. As the doors slid shut behind him, he heard a small spray of water as the bibarel rinsed the ash off the stonework.

The escalators and elevators were still working with pokemon crowding around them as they tried to get to their entertainment destinations. Most of the shops were now closed with only a couple of arcades open that weren't major gambling areas. A snorlax towered over the smaller pokemon, keeping a watchful eye on the crowds. He wore a yellow and black sash over his shoulders, a clear indicator that he wasn't there for a night out. Security was important in places like this and the more imposing the pokemon the better.

Tracer flashed his investigator badge at the crowd around the elevator and moved through them into the glass shell. A few other pokemon flowed in after him, their warm bodies increasing the temperature in the cozy confines. It stopped more times than he desired on it's way to the balcony, exchanging pokemon on the way.

Much to his surprise, the apartments weren't under strict investigation. The burnt patches of fake grass had a string of yellow tape around them, held up on plastic bollards and leaving enough space for pokemon to move past. Although the larger species would have had a harder time doing so.

Tracer left Widget to sniff over the ground as he checked over the walls around the burnt grass. No damage to the door to indicate a break in, but from what he'd gathered Hunter had been using his computer to bust through the card key lock. Just as he'd been told, there were no burn or heat marks on the walls. Just the grass where the officer's white hot body had landed.

"Hey, Tracer?"

Widget's large, brown eyes stared at him from the corner of the outdoor dining area.

"What is it?" Tracer asked.

"Right here…" Widget lowered his nose to the fake grass. "I can smell Surge."

Tracer raised an eyebrow and strolled over to him, his long trench coat billowing in the soft breeze. The area looked innocent enough, but the eevee's nose never lied.

"What do you think she was doing here?" Widget asked.

Tracer scratched behind his ear and let out a small breath. "She's taken a job for Socket."

"Yeh? But why would she be here? Binary has a good reputation with Meta City."

"I don't think she was here primarily to do something in Binary City."

Widget looked up at him out of the corner of his eye, keeping his nose to the ground.

"My guess," said Tracer. "Is that she's been told to take out Hunter."

The delphox's eye drifted back to the yellow tape and burnt grass.

"You've got that look in your eye again." Widget sat down heavily. "You've sussed something, haven't you?"

Tracer scratched his ear again and sighed. "I'm just thinking… that it wasn't him who fired that laser."

"You think it was Surge?"

Tracer was silent as he mulled this over. The shot had been clean enough to not touch any of the building. It was a purposeful, targeted shot. He let his paw fall to his side and slide into his deep pockets.

"She's a good shot," he said. "I've seen her work many times. It's always been on point."

"Aye," said Widget. "She often shoots to stun."

"Exactly." Tracer leant against the wall and pulled out another cigar, placing it between his teeth and lighting it with a quick flame from his nose. Thin smoke curled up from the end, rising into the twilight air. "So why would she miss Hunter and take out an entire magnezone fleet?"

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 15

A/N - Sorry about the delay. It slipped my mind! Also, this week's update may be late too. Just a head's up.

Chapter Fifteen

Macro perched on the edge of a foldout chair in the dark bedroom. The only light came from the crack around the door, slowly dwindling as the rest of Wildcard Gamma made their way to bed. Every movement DL made startled him, but he refused to leave. Leaving a frightened pokemon, unconscious or not, just didn't feel right at all. Anchor had offered to take over and give him the chance to get to bed, but he couldn't sleep. He'd tried a few times on the little chair, but his mind just wouldn't shut up.

He glanced over at the pachirisu huddled beneath her duvet. At some point she'd snuggled down into it but she'd been sound asleep. He was surprised she'd fallen asleep straight after passing out with sheer fright. She'd not woken up and panicked again, just… gone from one state of unconsciousness to the next. It had worried him, but he put it down to the computer in her brain. Some kind of safety feature that kicked in when the computer 'crashed'. A gentle reboot.

She stirred again and mumbled something, clutching the duvet in one paw. The light on her antennae flared to life, creating an eerie blue shadow up the wall that flickered in rhythm with it. He'd not noticed before, but the light was formed of two tiny LED bulbs, one stacked atop the other, and they both flickered out of sync with each other until they finally settled into one solid blue light. Her eyes opened slightly and she stirred again, blearily searching the room. Then they snapped wide open and locked onto the mawile. She tugged her duvet up to her chin and opened her mouth to scream, but Macro raised his paws and shushed her, glancing over at the door. He rose to his feet, but it only served to worsen the situation

and she frantically glanced around the room, nearly becoming one with the duvet as it tightened around her small body.

"Look, it's okay," he said.

She fixed her gaze on him again and a look of recognition flashed across her chocolate eyes. They softened as she relaxed enough to relinquish the duvet. Macro's heart did a somersault and he diverted his gaze to the wall.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"Wildcard Gamma." He lowered himself back into his seat and fidgeted his paws together. "Don't you remember?"

"I… I think so." She ran a paw over her ears, finding the antennae and visibly cringing. "What did… why… they've done something to me…"

"They? Who's 'they'?"

"I don't know. I don't remember…" Her eyes magnified as they filled with tears and she fell back into the pillow. "They've put something in my head."

Tears flowed down her face and soaked into the cotton pillow case. It was barely visible in the dim light, but he could see the damp patch spreading over the surface as she buried her muffled sobs into it.

"At least maybe now you'll stop wanting me to deliver you to Socket," he said bitterly.

She pushed herself up on one elbow and wiped a paw across her face. "What?"

"You don't remember?" he snorted.

"No? Wait…" Her eyes went distant and she flinched slightly. "I do remember…"

"So you do have memories?" he asked.

"Yes, I remember waking up in the cockpit. I remember you, Anchor, Matrix and Cookie. I know I'm supposed to be a computer linked to BackDoor, but I don't know why whoever put this computer in my brain did that."

"Do you have any memories prior to that at all?" Macro spread his paws slightly. "Like who you are? Your name?"

She shook her head slowly. "No. None."

"Where you came from?"

She shook her head again and pushed herself up, adjusting the pillow against the wall so she could lean against it.

"Do you know what BackDoor is?" Macro ventured.

"I've no idea what that is," she said. "Or where I came from. All I know is I'm linked to BackDoor and there's some entity called TimeSkip looking for time pockets. I received a couple of small updates while you were in Binary City."

"Matrix never mentioned that," he said.

Of course, that was no surprise. When he'd returned to his ship, their main priority had been installing her memories and then everything had taken a dramatic turn. He stared down at his paws clasped over his black scarf.

"They were nothing much," she said. "Just locations and failed discoveries."

Failed discoveries… a small wave of relieve flowed through him. Reading about the time gap Socket's team had managed to open still felt like a bad dream. The memory of it made him want to turn the light on.

"So you're a space pirate?" DL's voice made him visibly jump.

"Yeh." His voice came out surprisingly cautious. "All of us are."

"There's some information in my mind about Wildcard Gamma. Apparently the leader - Hunter - has a large price on his head. Is that you?"

He looked away from her towards the door. "It's an alias."

"Alias. Interesting." She paused for a moment, winding the duvet around her paws. "You have quite a list of crimes. It makes you sound evil."

"Well, that's their opinion," he said. "Space pirates have it hard living outside Socket's wretched rule. What's your opinion?"

"What memory I have of you has you as abrasive, rude and a liar," she said. "But not evil. I mean… you're helping me get my personality and memories back, and you don't need to do that."

He let out a single, dry laugh. "Maybe I'm just trying to annoy Socket."

"Maybe you care."

"Well. Wrenching the personality out of a living pokemon just to turn them into a computer really cheesed me off." He slipped from his seat and began to move towards the door. "I need some sleep. Will you be all right?"

"I should be." She tugged the duvet up to her chin again and stared down at the spot her feet poked through. "I think I've calmed down a bit."

He nodded and placed a paw on the panel beside the door. It slid open with a quiet hiss.

"Can I get you anything?" he asked without looking over his shoulder.

He heard her shuffle on the bed. "No. No, I'm fine."

"Are you sure? You missed supper."

She was silent for a moment then she shifted again. "I'm fine. I don't have an appetite right now."

He nodded again and strolled from the room, letting the door slide back into place behind him. In all fairness, he didn't have much of an appetite either. He let himself into his own room and prepared himself to fall into a dreamless sleep. Or so he hoped.

…

Shrill ringing cut through Socket's office and the holoscreen above her desk flashed into place. Socket turned away from the window, fixing the display with a frown. Who could it be at this hour? The city was barely awake. The horned head of a hoopa turned left and right as he tried to find her in the room and for a moment she considered staying where she was out of his limited line of sight.

"Where is that stupid psychic type?" he hissed.

"Oh, I do hope you're not referring to me?" Socket strode across the room so she was standing before the screen. "And if not, that is a very rude thing to say about Tweak."

The chingling looked up from his seat, his tiny face twisted with confusion that looked oddly innocent on him.

"I'm sorry, I don't get it," he said.

The gothitelle ignored him, folding her slender arms as she stared into the green and yellow eyes of the hoopa.

"What do you want, BackDoor?" she asked. "I'm busy."

"What, staring out of the window again?" A grin split his face and he let out a laugh that didn't even shake his body. "I think this is a bit more important than city watching."

Socket's eyes narrowed into slits. "Humour me."

He raised a grey, mitten-like paw in a one-sided shrug and closed his eyes. "TimeSkip found something."

"Oh really? I thought that onion monstrosity's discoveries had all been failures."

"Not this time. It managed to scour back into… what was it? Prehistoric times?"

"Humans existed in prehistoric times?" Socket gave him a dangerous leer. "I wanted you to reach back one thousand years ago."

"Hear me out, alright? You want some computer host to replace that pachirisu? Well how about this?"

He scooted to the side, revealing a bipedal lizard wrapped in golden chains. Three electric type pokemon struggled to hold it in place as it thrashed around. She couldn't hear their yelps of protest, but one of them shouted something that was nothing more than a murmur to her.

BackDoor's grinning face filled the holoscreen once more. "Found you a little tyrunt."

"It is still a pokemon," she said bluntly. "Unless you're going to tell me it's a human in pokemon form?"

He laughed again and shook his head. "It's a pokemon with a brain the size of an oran berry. It's not exactly got rights like the ones in your world. It's as irrelevant as a water dweller."

"And you expect me to fit a computer in that berry brain?" She tapped her claws along her arm. "Not to mention hiding an extinct creature from the prying eyes of Meta City's civilians!"

He rolled his eyes and groaned. "Fine! I'll send the stupid reptile back. But this is taking forever!"

"Then hurry up and find me a human!" she barked. "One in pokemon form so I don't have to hide it!"

"You know, this wouldn't be an issue if you'd just held on to that pachirisu," he said.

"Don't you dare speak to me like that, BackDoor. I had you made. I can just as easily take you apart and remove your personality core."

The hoopa folded his arms and fixed her with a chilling glare. "You can't do that from there, though, can you? Silly, mortal limitations. Let's see…" His eyes moved past her to a spot over her shoulder. "I can see a nice little world right behind you, filled with unbreathable air. I could send you there from where I'm floating." He removed the gold ring from his right horn and admired it. "That's a fun little thing about being digital."

The entire of Socket's mouth turned dry but she hid it behind a wry smirk. "You know full well I had nothing to do with Download Database being stolen."

"Really? Who's job is it to round up space pirates?" he scoffed.

"I've got that under control," she said with a smile.

"About time. If it weren't for him, I'd be able to get back to my job rather than scouring time and space for humans."

"Then if you want to get back to your job, speed things up!"

"Tell that to TimeSkip. Not me." He reached up a paw to the top of the screen and fixed her with a mocking grin. "BackDoor out."

The screen flicked off and vanished back into the desk. She tapped her foot irritably and dug her claws into her arm.

"Arrogant android," she said. "Why did I give that thing a personality?"

"Because you're lonely?" Tweak suggested.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said as she moved back to the window. "Companionship grates on me. It's little wonder I keep you around, but unfortunately you're a necessary thorn in my side. If I removed you, I'd just bleed out paperwork."

Tweak's tinkling laughter filled the room and she grimaced.

"I don't know why you didn't just implant a detonation chip in him," he said. "My grandmama always said there may one day be a threat of a robot uprising."

"Ridiculous theory. Besides, a detonation chip is too risky. I need him in one piece to finish this job, then I'll think about scrapping that stupid android for spares." She paused and let out a sigh. "I need news from Surge about Hunter's demise and fast."

"I don't understand why you're stressing over retrieving Download Database so much," said Tweak. "I mean… you're looking for a new host."

Socket pursed her lips together. "She was expensive. It would be much more cost effective to transfer her files directly, rather than start new."

"Is that even possible? He's already retrieved two memory disks, and BackDoor erased the more crucial information to stop Hunter discovering it."

She tapped her claws over her arm again and stared blankly out of the window. Tweak had a point… Download Database was likely

useless now. The repairs may end up being just as expensive as creating a new database.

"Nevertheless," she said. "I want it back. I'll just have to hope that Hunter hasn't messed it up too much."

…

Macro stretched and yawned widely as he left his bedroom. He'd barely slept a wink and the dark rings under his eyes betrayed it to anyone who looked at him. If it weren't for the bell blaring away for breakfast, he would have tried to stay in bed all morning, but his stomach gnawed at him the instant he began to think about food, joining the obnoxious bell in its rude wake-up serenade.

Anchor and DL were already perched around the dining table, DL now in her own little seat that Cookie must have recently acquired from storage, tucking in to the slurpuff's usual morning pancakes. Wait… Macro's eyes fell on a new plate sat beside the steaming fluffy berry circles. Waffles?

He grabbed his seat beside DL and immediately snatched one up, then poured syrup all over it.

"Someone's got a sweet tooth this morning," said Anchor.

Macro grunted a noncommittal reply and stuffed a fork of sticky waffle in his mouth.

"You look like you were up all night," the granbull went on.

"Couldn't switch my brain off," said Macro.

"Maybe you need an off switch like DL?" Anchor reached across the table to nudge her, but all he got in return was a chocolate glare. "Sorry… too soon?"

"I think it'll always be too soon, Anchor," she said. "I don't think I'll ever be okay with having a computer in my head."

Matrix buzzed into the dining room and fell into his seat opposite Macro. His large black eyes lit up and he reached across the table for the plates.

"Who requested waffles?" he asked.

"That would be DL!" Cookie fell into his seat with a plop, clutching a plate of steaming pancakes and waffles. "She told me they're her favorite so I just had to make them."

The pachirisu's yellow cheeks turned as red as a pikachu's.

"I might have found myself a new helping paw in here." Cookie beamed.

"Well, I can help where I can." DL lowered her fork and looked around at the table. "That leads me to say… Just because you're helping me retrieve my memories, I don't want to be treated like a patient or a client. I want to help, too."

Macro frowned and swallowed his mouthful. "Help how?"

"With retrieving those disks," she said. "And when I'm not doing that, I'll help Cookie in the kitchen."

"It's dangerous work, DL," said Anchor. "You've seen what's happened to us the past two trips. I got poisoned, Macro got his ass whupped by primape -"

"I did not get my ass whupped!" Macro seethed. He pointed his fork at DL. "Besides. You have no combat experience. At least not to my knowledge."

"Basic self defense is on this computer thing," she explained. "I could help in some way, and you could always teach me."

"That would just slow us down."

"Please!" She leant towards him, her chocolate eyes impossibly wide. "I want to help! I don't want to just be useless, left on this ship all the time!"

He shook his head slowly and placed his fork back on the table. "You're not useless. Anchor taught you how to use the ship's defenses. You can help Matrix with that."

The ribombee wound his antennae around his paw and looked from DL to Macro and back.

"Believe it or not," he said slowly. "I do actually know how to use the ship's weapons."

Macro's eyes flew wide open and he stared at Matrix aghast. "What?"

Matrix shrugged. "I get bored. I mess around with things sometimes. I could steer this ship if you wanted me to. Not well, but I could do it."

"So you're saying you don't need DL?"

Matrix shrugged and returned to his breakfast.

Macro sighed and let his head fall into his paws. "Way to help me out, dude."

DL stared at him for a moment then gave him a small nudge. He lifted his head again to look at her and a warm smile spread across her face.

"So are you going to let me help?" she asked.

He sighed again and rubbed at his scar. "Fine. I'll teach you how to fire a laser."

She did a small fist pump and whispered "Yes!"

Macro shook his head and jabbed his fork into his waffles. "I guess our first stop is Pulse City then, so we can buy you one."

After they'd finished their breakfast, they left DL to assist Cookie with the dishes while the rest of them migrated into the cockpit to make preparations for Pulse City.

Macro fell back into his seat and rubbed his face, trying to clear the grogginess away. His mind just didn't want to function and all he wanted to do was fall asleep right there and then, which didn't sound like a terrible idea.

"Pulse City is a fair way away," said Matrix. "We've been looping a figure-eight over the Backbone Mountain all night. It'll take the best part of a day to get there."

Macro waved a dismissive paw and yawned. "Whatever. We'll just enjoy the ride."

He opened his eyes and looked down through the window at the rocky peak stretching out for miles on either side below them, breaking the clouds where it dare reach high enough. The Backbone Mountain was another clean place, and naturally so. As such, it was a criminal offense to set up home there. Somehow, it had become a protected reserve, and only authorized pokemon were allowed to enter. No cameras, no sketch books, no drinks or anything that could produce litter, no live broadcasts or documentaries. Government pokemon only.

It was impossible to see it in detail from so high up, but rumor had it that the Backbone Mountain contained the last of the natural trees in all of System.

Macro didn't believe it.

The Backbone Mountain shrank below them as Wildcard Gamma moved up through the clouds, leaving System Ground behind. Macro kicked his feet up on the dashboard and tucked his paws behind his

head, watching the fluffy clouds pass by them, contrasted dramatically against a deep blue sky. It was beautifully silent. The only sounds came from the navigation system as the radar refreshed rhythmically. He felt his eyes fall shut and an erratic dream played out in his mind, living out the cockpit as Anchor and Matrix exchanged playful banter.

Suddenly, DL's voice cut through them as she strolled in with a tray of cookies. "Something's wrong."

Macro turned sharply to look over the back of his seat. The first thing he noticed about DL was there were no cookies. Secondly, the antennae on her head was flickering orange below the steady, blue light.

"Retrieving information from TimeSkip." The voice came out as emotionless as it had the previous morning.

Her pupils dilated and she slid down against the door, staring blankly at the windscreen. Despite having witnessed it before, it was still alarming. Macro watched frozen from his seat as that orange light pulsed erratically.

"Information received," she said. "Location revealed as System, exactly nine hundred and ninety two years ago. Relaying co-ordinates."

A string of numbers flew from her mouth that were meaningless to Macro. Her eyes still looked wrong. Even her posture looked wrong. The computer in her head had taken over completely, using her as nothing more than a means to relay information.

The orange light blinked out with one final flicker and her lifeless eyes filled with confusion as she pushed herself back to her feet. Her breath began to come in quick bursts and she steadied herself against the wall with a trembling paw.

"What just happened?" She began to shake from ear to tail. "It was like… something was speaking in my head…"

Macro let his chin rest on the back of his chair. TimeSkip… co-ordinates… Why did Socket want to use this pachirisu to scour time and space for humans? What was she wanting to do, exactly?

Matrix's paws flew over the screen, drawing Macro's attention and his heart lurched into his throat as he watched the ribombee key in new co-ordinates.

"What are you doing?!" Macro shrieked, flying from his chair.

"Checking out what this TimeSkip is," he said.

"Not a chance!"

Macro rushed to the screen and collided with Matrix's flailing fist. Despite the tiny size, it packed quite a wallop on his jaw. A look of momentary despair crossed the ribombee's features when he realised what he'd done but it quickly melted away as he rubbed his bruised knuckles in his other paw.

"We are not meddling in Socket's creepy plan!" Macro told him as he absently rubbed his jaw. "Return the co-ordinates to Pulse City and forget about all this TimeSkip and BackDoor nonsense."

"We can't do that when she keeps getting updates from them," said Matrix. "If we track down this TimeSkip then we can destroy it. DL will be freed from its random updates and we can hopefully all get some peace."

"I'm with Matrix," said DL.

Macro jerked his head round to her. She was still trying to catch her breath, leaning against the door as she wound her paws together.

"If we destroy it," she said, "then not only will it leave me alone, but it won't be able to do… whatever it is it's meant to be doing."

He opened his mouth to retort but all words fell dead on his tongue when he met those pleading, chocolate eyes. His jaw snapped shut again and he placed a paw to his forehead and groaned.

"She has a point, Cap'n," said Anchor. "Poor mite's suffering 'cos of this."

DL shifted awkwardly and diverted her attention back to the passing sky.

Macro's muzzle creased and he looked away from her back at the navigation screen. Wildcard Gamma was moving in the opposite direction to Pulse City at a breakneck speed, and to make matters worse, someone was following them again. He briefly considered calling out the ship's bubble missile launchers to deal with that nuisance.

"Fine." He returned to his seat and kicked his feet back up onto the dashboard. "We'll follow these co-ordinates and destroy TimeSkip. But after that, I want nothing to do with Socket's crazy plan. Understood?!"

"Understood." Matrix and DL spoke simultaneously, the latter oddly enough with a salute.

Macro sighed and leant back in his seat. He had a horrible feeling he was going to regret this.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 16

Chapter Sixteen

The glowing, golden light beckoned, spanning in a perfect circle around a swirling black and ultraviolet mist. The talonflame's wings pushed on towards it, drawing ever closer. Something wasn't right. His mother had always told him curiosity killed the meowth, but he couldn't just leave it. It was his job to keep System safe, and if this was a threat then it needed to be inspected and promptly dealt with.

But something was very off. That glowing light… its eeriness unnerved him. Anomalies in System were few and far between and they rarely brought anything good.

That perfect circle of golden light… whatever it was, it was deliberate. It had been put there. A trap? He faltered, keeping both eyes on the centre of the swirling mist. It didn't look like a trap. There was nothing to suggest it as such. But it had definitely been made. Perfect circles were rarely an accident. Something was familiar about it, but he couldn't place it.

Perfect golden circles. Filled with a swirling darkness.

He shook his head sharply and beat his wings hard, pushing himself further towards the anomaly. He couldn't back out now. If it could harm his home, then it needed to be gotten rid of, and if you wanted to get rid of something then you needed to know what it was. You couldn't treat the disease with just a guess. You'd end up doing more harm than good.

Another wing beat and he paused, hovering a mere two feet away. It was impossible. He couldn't see a thing beyond that mist. He narrowed his eyes and turned them onto the golden ring of light. Was it moving towards him?

A shrill screech left his beak and he looked back down at the world below, minuscule like a toy town. It was falling away from him at an alarming pace. Whatever that black mist was, it was dragging him in!

He beat his wings to turn back towards the earth, aiming each beat towards the strange ring. But the earth still fell away from him. He craned his neck to the right and his golden eyes widened as he watched his tail feathers vanish beyond that swirling darkness. His beak opened again, letting out another scream. A terrified scream he'd not heard come from himself in many, many years.

…

System Sky's cities were long behind Wildcard Gamma, leaving them with nothing but a stretch of deep, dark blue. Fluffy grey clouds spread out below them, kicked up into small wisps by the ship's tail fin.

Macro kept one eye on the fuel gauge. None of them had thought to top up before embarking on such a ridiculously long journey and it was well below half. Matrix had reassured him their continuous loop over the Backbone Mountain hadn't been demanding and had therefore used up very little, leaving them with an ample supply to last them the trip, but that didn't take into consideration any potential combat they might find themselves in.

Not to mention their stalker was on their tail yet again.

The suspicious red dot flew along behind them, keeping their distance. He wondered if it was Surge following them, but that thought just made his head spin. If she'd been hired for another job, then she wouldn't be wasting her time following him around. Whatever the case, he wasn't sure the tailing ship was even friendly, and unlike Surge wouldn't leap to their aid. That could leave them stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Something twinkled on the horizon and he squinted to get a better look at it. Golden. Another government fleet? He pursed his lips in

thought. Maybe Socket had got a head start on them. That sneaky gothitelle.

"Can we speed up?" he asked Anchor.

The granbull pushed the steering stick forwards and Wildcard Gamma surged through the sky. The golden specks grew larger, forming the smooth, streamline shells of Socket's prized fleet. But there was something else ahead of them. Something glittering gold miles beyond the ships.

"Do you see that?" Macro pointed a claw.

"Aye," said Anchor. "Wonder what it is? Another ship?"

"It's too big for that," said Macro. "I'm wondering if it's what they're aiming for."

"Only one way to find out," said Anchor.

Macro placed a claw between his teeth, gnawing the sharp tip away. Something about that ring made him feel anxious. If Socket really was tearing holes in time and space, they could very well be staring at one.

"We may be hard pressed to beat them, though," said Anchor. "We'll need our cloak up, and that might drain the rest of our fuel."

Macro shook himself back into reality and leant back in his seat.

"We always beat her," he said. "So take the risk."

"If you're sure," said Anchor. "Let it never be said I didn't warn you."

Macro sighed and ran a paw over his face. "If we're quick, then it might survive the flight."

The granbull shrugged and his paw flew over the dashboard to activate the cloak. Gradually they inched towards the golden fleet,

and with each stretch the intricate details over their shimmering hulls became clearer.

"We just lost our stalker," said Matrix. "They've deliberately fallen behind."

"Probably scared of the fleet," said Macro.

DL leant on the dashboard beside Macro, her white fur brushing against his. He snatched his arm back into his side and glanced at her, but her attention drifted from the gauge to the government fleet.

"I'm running some calculations," she said, "and I think we might just make it."

"Well, that's a relief." Macro leant his elbow on his arm rest and placed his chin in his paw. "I hate losing to Socket."

"Have you ever lost to her?" she asked.

"No. But I know I'd hate it if I did."

"There was that one time in Raster City when she hid those explosives," said Matrix.

"Yeh, but I managed to track them back down into Seed City and kick all their tails," said Macro. "I got them explosives and made a fortune."

DL looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "You make it sound like you did it all yourself."

Anchor snorted but said nothing, and Macro gave a nonchalant shrug.

"Wildcard Gamma is pretty much one entity," he said. "We all have our own part to play."

"Just like a schooling wishiwashi." DL nodded. "I think I get it now."

Macro gave her a playful grin and turned his attention back onto the fleet. They were almost upon it now, and not one of the ships had noticed them. Anchor steered Wildcard Gamma to the left, bringing it around to the side of the fleet to zip straight past it. Macro kept one eye on the nearest ship. Small. They were so small compared to his ship, designed solely for quick excursions with the barest of essentials on board. They weren't designed to be lived in.

Whatever was ahead of them had formed into a large, golden ring, shimmering about a mile ahead of the fleet. It swirled with an eerie ultraviolet mist that didn't spread out from beyond the ring. It was as though the golden halo contained it, refusing to let such an abomination leak out into the deep blue sky.

A small movement came from the nearest gold ship and Macro's eyes snapped to it. The top had opened up and the nozzle of a canon laser turned on its axis to take aim at Wildcard Gamma. His eyes widened and he reached across to nudge Anchor a little too harshly.

"They know we're here!" he shrieked. "They're gonna fire! Unleash the school!"

Anchor didn't need telling twice. The smaller wishiwashi cannons snapped into place around his ship and a deep whir filled the hollow body as they rotated around them. Wildcard Gamma turned on the spot to aim the small fish-shaped cannons and a large bubble collided with the golden ship's neon laser. The explosion blew them both backwards, knocking the fleet off course.

Wildcard Gamma turned slowly and chugged towards the golden ring, leaving behind a trail of bubbles that exploded one by one no sooner did the nose of one of the ships come into contact with it.

Macro threw his arms in the air and cheered, eliciting a squeak of surprise from DL and an eye roll from Anchor.

He turned on his seat and waved a fist at the rear of the cockpit. "How do you like that?! You can never beat me!"

Anchor let out a small sigh. "I really worry one day your mouth is gonna land us all in trouble."

Macro, still laughing, sat back in his seat and kicked his feet up onto the dashboard. "You're a pirate, Anchor, you're supposed to welcome trouble! Live on the edge!"

"On that note," said Matrix, "you might wanna fasten your seat belts. There's a missile heading our way."

"Eh?"

Macro turned his head to look back at Matrix, but he let out a protest as DL's warm body climbed up beside him and dragged the seatbelt across them both. His lips curled into a sneer but it was soon wiped away as the missile struck the right side of his ship.

"Tell me you threw up the shields!" he said.

"Of course I did," said Anchor. "I also dropped the cloak since it's fairly pointless right now. But the shield doesn't exactly hold off missiles."

Macro groaned and slid down in his seat. That would have left a mark, and possibly a dent.

Wildcard Gamma sent out another stream of bubble bombs, blowing back the opposing fleet further, but the telltale whistle of another missile penetrated the ship.

"Take it out!" Macro screeched.

"I'm tryin'!" Anchor roared.

His large paws worked fast and the missile never struck home, but the impact from the counter attack sent the hulking wishiwashi

surging sideways, throwing Macro across his chair and crushing his rib cage between the sparsely padded arm and DL.

The pachirisu mumbled an apology as she righted herself and quickly checked over the seatbelt.

Macro's eyes flew back to the window and widened as he let out a rather loud expletive.

The golden halo of light spread out on either side of them, swirling with a black mist that leaked ultraviolet light. It was oddly silent, but the effects could be felt throughout the ship. Anchor fought with the steering stick, shouting profanity at it as it refused to turn the ship around. Whatever the golden ring was, it was pulling them in.

"I think this is some kind of black hole," said Matrix, in a way Macro felt was wildly unhelpful.

All the mawile could think to reply with was, "You think?!"

Wildcard Gamma's engine roared as Anchor tugged the stick towards him and twisted it. The huge ship turned with it, but the swirling anomaly's drag was too strong. The larger end of the ship was pulled back towards it, filling the windscreen with a terrifying, swirling, unknowable demise.

Macro screwed his eyes shut and grit his teeth together. He couldn't watch. Whatever happened to them, he just didn't want to see it. His paws balled into fists over his knees, and he could feel DL trembling beside him.

This was it.

This was how he was going to die.

A loud scream reached his ears and his eyes flew back open. It hadn't come from any of his crew mates, but his first thought flew to Cookie. However, it had come from the wrong direction. The swirling

anomaly spewed forth a flurry of red and black feathers, beating back and forth as their owner tried desperately to return to whatever the ring contained. But it was instead thrown towards the ship. For that one fleeting moment, the pull lessened and Anchor was able to steer Wildcard Gamma away.

The mist surrounding the flapping mass subsided and a talonflame flew forth from it, its beak hanging open in a state of silent terror. Its eyes flew straight to the ship and that scream filled the cockpit again before the large bird pokemon turned and flew back towards the golden ring.

But in a flash, the ring vanished. The swirling black and ultraviolet mist was replaced with the deep blue sky. The talonflame flew in place for a moment then shook its head and darted away from them and through the spot the ring had occupied.

Wildcard Gamma lurched to the side and the windscreen was filled with golden metallic bodies as the fleet took after the talonflame.

Macro gave himself a mental shake and slammed his paw onto the dashboard.

"After them!" he said. "Socket ain't getting her paws on that talonflame!"

Anchor pushed the ship forwards. His large paws were still trembling but the ship moved along smoothly, gradually picking up pace as it trailed after the fleeing fleet.

"What do you plan to do with the talonflame?" DL asked.

Macro shrugged. "No idea, but Socket clearly wants it. If it came from another world like I'm guessing, maybe I'll just hold it for ransom to pay off my bounty and regain some sense of security in this wretched world."

The pachirisu gave him a sideways glance and brushed her blue fur back from her eyes.

"You're kidding, right?" she asked.

Macro shrugged again and leant back in his seat. "It's a pokemon eat pokemon world out there, DL. When you live outside the law like we do, you do what you can to survive."

Her nose crinkled and she looked away from him. "I'm not sure I like that."

"Do you like what Socket had done to you?" he asked. "'Cos I'm gonna guess you were living inside the law before then."

She avoided his eyes, keeping her attention on the golden hulls of the government ships.

"This world is a state," Macro told her. "You need to pick a side - Socket, or the outlaws. If you don't like what we do, then I can always drop you back on System Ground and you can fend for yourself. Anchor, fire!"

A series of bubbles filled the windscreen and flew towards the fleet, blasting them aside and ripping a clean path through them. The talonflame was just ahead of them, fighting off a stream of sparking, metallic chains. They fastened around his wings, pinning them to his sides. He plummeted towards the ground until the chains went taught and hung there, swinging like a feathery pendulum.

"What do you suggest we do now?" Anchor asked.

Wildcard Gamma was still trudging along at a breakneck pace. It didn't leave Macro much time to think. He reached across the dashboard and slammed his paws over the display. The nose of the schooling wishiwashi began to slowly rise, cutting off the bottom of the windscreen and what he could see of the talonflame.

The fleet's turrets turned on them, the nozzles lighting up with a dangerous neon green light. The chains holding the talonflame broke like butter beneath the wishiwashi's jaws. Macro's eyes flew towards each of the threatening cannons and he swallowed drily.

"Hyper drive," he said.

"This close to the fleet?" Anchor raised an eyebrow. "You're kidding, right?"

"Turn the ship and hit hyper drive!"

Anchor shook his head and tugged the ship to the right. It lurched forwards, pushing them all back into their seats. The fleet bounced away from them and shot past in a golden streak, then they were gone.

…

Wildcard Gamma slowed a little too much for Macro's liking. His eye flew to the fuel gauge and his heart sank like a lead brick.

"Oh no…" He placed his face in his paws and sighed.

The gauge was nearly at zero, and they were miles away from Pulse City's fuel station. Not many stations would be happy to cater to such large flying vessels, let alone a space pirate.

"Guess we didn't really think this through," said Matrix.

"Don't be silly, Matrix," said Anchor. "None of us coulda seen that little escapade coming."

"Our stalker is back as well," said Matrix. "Just broke their own hyper drive right next to us."

Great. That didn't bode well at all.

"What do you suggest we do?" DL asked.

Macro spread his claws and stared blankly through the windscreen at the rapidly darkening cloudscape.

"Take a pod?" Anchor suggested. "And start making plans for Wildcard Delta?"

Macro's heart sank even further and he looked around at his ship while letting out a low groan. Did he really have to leave his beloved ship to plummet to a watery demise?

A sharp thunk of something hitting metal reverberated through the cockpit and he sat upright and looked over at the door. Anchor frowned and scratched the base of his mowhawk.

"What was that?" he asked.

Macro unbuckled his seatbelt and slid off his chair. "Wait here and prepare to activate the escape pods."

"Hang on, Cap'n!" Anchor reached out a paw to stop him. "You're checkin' it out alone?"

"I won't allow that," said DL.

Macro looked at each of his crew mates, ending with Matrix who met his eyes while twirling his left antennae in one paw.

"A captain always goes down with his ship," said Macro. "And it's my responsibility to make sure you all get off it safely. Make sure you take that talonflame with you as well. No sense in stopping Socket taking it only to let it fall into the ocean with Wildcard Gamma, is there?"

Anchor snorted and balled his fist. "I'm waitin' right here in case you need back up. Alright?"

"Fine." Macro looked back down at the ribombee. "Matrix, take DL into the cargo hold and prepare to escape with the talonflame. Anchor will be with you shortly."

The mawile fired the granbull a violet glare then left the cockpit. He opened the air lock's inside door and before he could even open the outer one he could already feel the temperature difference. The door opened and he poked his head out, clenching his teeth together as the chill cut through his fur and shocked his lungs with every breath. Frost lined the blue hull of his ship, creating a web across each of the tiny windows.

He squinted against the wind and brushed back a lock of black fur that whipped up to obscure his vision. Right at the tail of Wildcard Gamma flew a ship shaped like a tympole. A long pipe extended from its side and attached to the other end, perched atop the tympole's back, was a small, bipedal form with a very familiar ragged tail. Unlike himself, she'd decided to wear a helmet and padded suit to cut out the freezing air. Attached to her back was an oxygen tank that allowed her to breathe a bit better amidst the low air pressure, but the overall get up made it look more like she was preparing for a space excursion.

"Surge?" The wind drowned out most of his voice.

He crept from the door and scrambled onto the wishiwashi's main fin. She looked up as he drew closer and her muzzle twisted with fright. She pulled back from the pipe spilling red liquid down towards the ocean below. The tart stench of fuel hit him like a wet flannel and he took a step back. The zigzagoon reached out a paw, flailing helplessly several feet away.

"Get back inside!" Her voice was barely audible over the wind. "You're going to fall to your death, you moron!"

Macro shook his head and used his paws to steady himself as he climbed across the broad fin. "Not until you tell me what you're doing."

He thought he saw her sigh and she returned to her task. "I hacked into your ship's computer and saw you were low on fuel, so I followed you back from…"

She trailed off, but he didn't think it was purely because the wind was drowning out her voice.

"How on earth did you hack into my ship's computer?!" he spat.

"A hacker has her ways." She removed the pipe and fixed her brown eyes on his. "That should last you to Pulse City. Be more careful next time."

She released the pipe and it retracted into itself, flying back towards her own fuel tank. She disconnected it and clambered down towards her ship's door.

"Wait! Surge!"

She looked back up at him, but her expression was unreadable.

Macro gestured back to the door. "You saw us take that taloflame, right?"

"I did."

"It came out of that ring." He paused and scratched his head. "Don't you… wanna find out where it came from?"

"You're inviting me on board?" she asked.

He shrugged. "You did just help me out."

"Sorry, Macro," she said. "You don't want me on your ship."

She vanished inside the tympole and its door whirred shut behind her.

Macro shook his head slowly and turned as carefully as he could, retracing his steps along the wishiwashi's fin. Getting back into his ship was much easier than climbing out and soon he was back on board. The air lock hissed shut behind him and as the next door opened, he let out a yelp of surprise.

Anchor's eyes widened slightly and he looked from the mawile to the door and back.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"Fine." Macro pushed past him. "Someone just stopped to give us fuel."

"You're kidding, right? Who'd help us?"

"I'm as confused as you are." Macro scratched his head and looked back up at his friend. "I guess we should check on that talonflame."

Anchor grunted and followed Macro down the corridor. Tiny paw steps and a deep buzz told him DL and Matrix had not only ignored his orders, they'd grown a little too curious and decided to join them, but he said nothing. Part of him appreciated the extra backup, even if it did mean his navigation system was unattended for a little while.

The stairs towards the cargo hold were situated inside Wildcard Gamma's loot room. Shelves holding various weapons adorned the walls, many of which were long out of service and beyond repair. Amongst them were artifacts he'd taken over the years, from valuable badges and coins to government ship parts. At some point, they'd be worth selling. Each door to the stairs needed one of the crew's paw prints to unlock it. The stairs were badly lit and Macro had to squint to see where he was going. He nearly walked into the door and muttered under his breath as he opened it out into the cargo hold.

The wishiwashi's maw was fastened tightly shut, preventing anyone from entering or leaving, but the panel to open it lay on the right side of its jaws. The talonflame was oddly silent, lying on its side in a tangle of chains that pinned its wings to its body. When it saw them, its beak flew open and it let out a scream.

"What do you want with me?!" The voice was male. "Where am I? What was that… thing?!"

Macro moved over to him and began tugging at the chains. "You're in System."

"System?!"

"Yup. To be exact, you're in System Sky."

The talonflame's beak hung open and his golden eyes widened. "What?"

"As for what that thing was," Macro went on, "it's apparently a tear in time and space. And those golden ships? They're the bad guys."

"So that makes you the good guys?"

Macro laughed and stood back up. "No one in System can be called a 'good guy'." He turned to Anchor and nodded to the feathered pokemon. "Think you can break these chains? I don't even know where to begin."

The granbull moved over to the talonflame and the bird cowered slightly as his massive fists reached down and tugged the chains apart. He let out a grunt and the golden links snapped audibly. They fell away from the talonflame and he pushed himself to his feet, stretching out his wings with a grateful sigh.

He looked from Anchor to Macro. "Thanks."

The mawile shrugged. "Whatever. So, where did you come from?"

"I came from System," the talonflame explained. "Although… I don't remember there being huge, flying, metal wishiwashi."

"So I was right. It was a tear in time and space." Macro scratched his scar.

"Things just got real," said Matrix.

Macro shrugged again and closed his eyes. "I guess we need to get you back, then, huh?"

"The ring vanished, though." Matrix twirled his antennae. "Right?"

The talonflame grimaced and looked over at the closed jaws of the ship.

"We'll figure a way." Macro folded his arms. "If Socket's tearing time and space open, we'll just make her send him back."

His paw went to his laser and the talonflame followed it, his eyes widening slightly again.

"So what's your name, big guy?" Macro asked.

"It's Switch," answered the talonflame.

"Switch, eh?" Macro grinned. "Since you're not from here, I guess telling you my real name doesn't matter, does it? I'm Macro, and this is my ship, Wildcard Gamma."

The talonflame raised an eyebrow and looked over at the rest of the crew. His eyes wandered to a strange, rather retro-looking digital watch around his right ankle.

"Well," he said. "I guess if we're being honest, and this really is System, then I don't need to hide myself, do I?"

He reached a claw to the watch and pushed the only button it sported. His entire body expanded and stretched out, filling up a majority of the cargo hold. Sprawled on the floor in the same space the talonflame had occupied was a strange bipedal creature that left Macro at a loss for words. The mawile's jaw fell open and he crumpled to the ground onto his bottom.

The strange creature - Switch - ran a hairless paw through a mop of red and brown fur on the top of his head and sighed. In fact, it was the only fur Macro could even see. The rest of his body was clothed

in a brown flight jacket and a pair of black, baggy pants with way too many pockets for any sane pokemon to have. A long, thin black scarf trailed down his back in a way that said it was there for fashion more than for function.

He opened his golden eyes and met Macro's violet ones, reflecting his confusion. A thud behind him told him someone had fainted, and from the sound of it, it wasn't Anchor. The granbull stood beside him silently. His large mouth opened and closed as he attempted to find words but his eyes kept going to the ceiling thoughtfully, as if he was worried any words he chose might offend the strange… pokemon?… sitting before them.

Macro shook his head slowly, not taking his eyes off Switch. "What are you?"

Switch raised an eyebrow and leant back slightly. "What am I? I thought this was System?… I'm a human."

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 17

A/N - Thanks for the follows and faves! =D

Chapter Seventeen

A *human* ? A *human* was sat in his cargo hold? Macro blinked in bewilderment. Switch hadn't moved an inch since he'd declared such a statement. He stared back at the mawile, matching his open-mouthed, wide-eyed expression.

So humans existed. He had living proof. Maybe Socket wasn't as crazy as he'd thought.

He didn't look like he'd expected humans too, however. The old fairy tale books he'd read as a hatchling depicted them as some strange passimian-nuzleaf hybrid with a pair of lightly furred paws with incredibly long fingers that could have given a galvantula leg envy. What he had sat before him looked nothing like any pokemon he'd ever seen. The closest would be a sawk or throh, but that would have been stretching things a bit.

Macro shifted so his paw was resting on his hip and Switch jolted, his eyes flying to the mawile's laser. Macro forced a grin and let out a small laugh.

"Don't worry," he said. "I ain't gonna shoot ya."

Switch closed his eyes as he sighed and leant back on his paws. "That's a relief. I don't think I've ever seen a pokemon with a weapon before. I feel like I've entered an alternate universe or something."

"I wouldn't know about that," said Macro. "I mean, according to folklore, humans used to exist here. Apparently. Can't say I ever believed it. It was just all nonsense told to gullible hatchlings."

"Well, I was always skeptical." Anchor turned and scooped up an unconscious Matrix. "I mean, if they all went back through that Fracture thing, then there wouldn't be any fossils left. Would there?"

"The Fracture?" Switch looked up at the granbull. "So that happened here?"

"I guess so," said Macro. "Ten centuries ago."

"Ten…" Switch's eyes went distant and he mouthed something quietly that sounded a lot like maths. "Wait… one thousand years ago?!"

"Hit the nail on the head there, pal." Macro turned towards the stairs. "Suppose we'd better get you back quickly then if you're gonna have any shot at getting back through that Fracture thing to your own world, eh?"

"I think you're mistaken," said Switch. "We already closed the Fracture years ago."

Macro turned and raised an eyebrow. "Eh?"

"Allow me to help," said DL. "Whereas one thousand years is an approximation, that tear reached back nine hundred and ninety two years ago. Not one thousand."

"So you're saying that tear was post-Fracture?" Macro asked her.

"Going off what he's said, apparently."

"Wow." Macro folded his arms. "Socket got pretty lucky to pull a straggler through."

"I wouldn't call myself a straggler," said Switch. "But the humans have definitely gone back home. Well… most of them."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I didn't want to. System became my home and there was so much I hadn't seen. Still haven't seen!"

Macro rolled his eyes and scanned the stairwell door open. "More fool you for wanting to stay in this world. If I had the chance to leave, I'd go willingly. And I doubt I'm alone in that, either." He waved a paw at the human and cleared his throat. "You might want to 'bird up' again. Not everywhere on my ship is as wide as this cargo hold."

Switch reached for his watch which was now around his right wrist, and at the press of a button shrank down into the winged form of a talonflame. The sight tied Macro's stomach in knots.

"I don't think I'm ever gonna get used to that," he said.

Anchor went ahead of Macro, cradling a mumbling Matrix in his arms. DL followed close behind Macro, her silent paw steps drowned out beneath the skittering claws as Switch scrambled after them.

"I never have liked narrow corridors," he said. "So, you said this is your ship?"

"Yup. Wildcard Gamma," said Macro.

"Gamma?" Switch made a small chuckle. "What happened to Alpha and Beta?"

"We don't talk about Alpha and Beta," said Macro.

Anchor's mowhawk swayed from side to side as he shook his head.

"Oh…" said Switch. "I was actually just joking."

The door into the loot room opened and Macro kept one eye over his shoulder, watching the talonflame's golden eyes scan the room with awe. He said nothing, however, as they passed through it into the main body of the ship.

"This is where the bedrooms are," Macro told him. "I'll sort you one out later. I'm sure DL won't mind lending a paw?"

The pachirisu shook her head.

"You want me to stay on your ship?" Switch asked.

"Well, I hardly think System is acclimated to humans at this present time," said Macro. "And since Socket is after you for reasons I'll explain shortly, then I think you're safest with a bunch of space pirates. Don't you?"

"Space pirates?" Switch took a small step back.

Macro placed his paws on his hips. "They have space pirates in your time line?"

"They had ocean pirates," said Switch. "Out by the Analogue Islands."

"Isles."

"Pardon?"

"It's the Analogue Isles," said Macro.

Switch frowned. "What difference does it make?"

"None whatsoever. But it's what everyone calls them. Besides, you don't want to go there." Macro turned and continued down the corridor. "This room on the end is the washroom. Opposite is the kitchen and dining area."

Cookie's brown face peeked around the door and beamed when he saw Switch. "Someone else new for dinner? Good job I've made plenty, huh?"

Switch gave him a warm smile and followed Macro into the cockpit.

"And this is where all the action takes place," said Macro.

"It's also kind of where we all hang out," said Anchor as he set Matrix into his seat.

The ribombee rubbed his head and looked around slowly. "When did we get back into the cockpit?"

Macro pulled himself up into his seat and kicked his feet up onto the dashboard. "Any questions?"

"Yes, a few, actually." Switch looked around the room. "Firstly, you don't have enough seats to match your crew numbers."

"Well, you and DL are fairly new," said Macro. "We can get that looked into once we can afford it."

Switch visibly flinched. "It's not very safe, though, is it?"

"The life of a space pirate isn't at the best of times. If we find ourselves in combat, hunker down and close your eyes if it's too much for you."

"Combat? I thought pokemon fought using their elemental attacks and you're in a ship armed with little guns." Switch raised an eyebrow. "Why are you carrying weapons?"

"They're to counter our weaknesses," said Macro.

"You're weakness is fire." Switch was thoughtful for a moment then a small smile tugged at his beak and he winked. "Does that mean it's a water pistol?"

Macro met his smirk with a frown. "Are you sassing me?"

Switch's golden eyes widened and he shook his head. "No! Not at all. I was just making a joke."

"Another? You do that a lot."

Switch shrugged and cowered into himself. "I'm sorry. I'm just nervous. I mean, I got dragged through a porthole into another world! And not for the first time, either!"

Macro stared at him then rolled his eyes and sighed. "Fine. I get you're anxious, but seriously. Relax. If time and space is being torn open, I'm sure you're world will be opened up again soon enough. Besides, DL should know that as soon as it happens."

"Oh yeh. That reminds me." Switch ruffled his feathers and turned his eyes onto DL. "Why does a pachirisu have an antennae and socket? Is she a robot? Because if so, then that's pretty advanced and phenomenally life-like compared to what I'm used to."

"DL is actually a pachirisu," said Macro. "As for her… enhancements… we'll… you ready for a bit of a shock, Switch?"

"I think the one I've had is large enough, thank you."

"This one is actually about you." Macro narrowed his eyes and swiveled fully in his seat. "You see, there's a reason you've been dragged into another time line. And I don't think you're gonna like it one bit."

…

Socket paced back and forth in her office with her paws clasped behind her back, keeping the split holoscreen in her peripheral vision. The worried, chubby face of Yobi greatly contrasted BackDoor's amused expression.

"So let me get this straight." She rounded on the screen and Yobi cowered behind the panel of his handheld. "You found a pocket that reached back almost ten centuries ago… and Hunter interfered again?"

The sparksurfer raichu nodded briskly. "But in all fairness-"

"What did he take this time?" she asked.

"A talonflame," said Yobi.

BackDoor folded his arms and closed his eyes while the raichu glanced away from the screen.

"A talonflame," Socket repeated. "Or a human?"

"Well, erm…" Yobi shuffled in his seat. "It's hard to say."

"Weren't a pokemon," said BackDoor. "That's for certain."

"So it wasn't a pokemon?" Socket tapped her claws over her arm and narrowed her eyes at the raichu.

"Nope," said BackDoor. "My scan data came back all wrong. Everything about it - its heat signature, brain waves, chip data - all wrong. If I were to hazard a guess - and it's a fairly educated guess - I'd say what your little vermin took off with was in fact a human."

Yobi flinched and sank down in his seat so only his ears were visible.

Socket rubbed the bridge of her nose between two claws. "So you're telling me that Hunter has taken off with a human? My human?!"

BackDoor raised his stubby paw. "Along with your living computer. Yes."

Socket rounded on the hoopa. "You're not helping!"

"Hey, you don't pay me to be an agony aunt," he said.

"I don't pay you at all."

BackDoor folded his arms and grinned. "Yeh. We really need to talk about that. Your employee care is absolutely shocking."

The fur on the back of Socket's neck stood on end and she pursed her lips together, fixing the grinning hoopa in a vicious leer before rounding back on the quaking raichu.

"That space pirate really is the mothim in my honey," she muttered. "How has he beaten me? How did he know where to look?"

"That's because there's one little flaw I'm trying to work around," said Yobi quickly. "Download Database receives information from the other artificials in the BackDoor network."

"So he gets live updates from wherever these gates open?" Socket closed her eyes and seethed. "Is there any way you can remove Download Database from it?"

"Not without obtaining her," said Yobi. "As a safety precaution, we deliberately designed Download Database so it could only be disconnected from the user's end. That way, if someone were to obtain one of the artificials then they couldn't disconnect Download Database and the host could be used to track down the missing artificial, however Download Database can disconnect other artificials from the network, blocking their access to confidential information."

"That's a neat little oversight you forgot to inform me about." Socket spoke with a dangerous air that made the raichu cower and BackDoor break into hysterical fits of laughter. "What, may I ask, do you plan to do about this?"

Yobi glanced to the side. "Like I said… I'm trying to work on something."

"Then work faster!" She tapped her foot rapidly and frowned. "I trust an investigation into the human's whereabouts, along with finding a replacement, are in action?"

Yobi nodded with such ferocity his ears flopped back and forth. "Oh yes! Already I've copied the program from TimeSkip into Zero Day,

and they are being deployed to all corners of System Sky as we speak!"

"Urgh, not Zero Day." BackDoor slammed a paw into his face. "Whenever I communicate with those things it's like having a million voices in my head all vying for first place."

Yobi glanced sideways at the adjoining screen. "I admit there are problems, but I can assure you they are as stable as we could possibly get them in the limited time-"

"Enough!" Socket stamped her foot. "You had ample time! Will it still work? That's the question!"

"Oh, it'll work." Yobi forced a smile to counter his doubtful tone. "And with so many out there scouring for dimension and time pockets, we should find a replacement in no time."

"And of the current human?"

Yobi shrugged and immediately regretted it. He cowered back from Socket's glare and cleared his throat.

"We'll…" He stuttered. "We'll have someone track-"

"Forget it." Socket tapped her arm irritably. "I'll get my mercenary on it. You just focus on doing your job. As for you." She looked back at the hoopa who grinned widely and met her glare. "Keep a close eye on TimeSkip and Zero Day. Make sure you're there in no time flat to open up those pockets and grab anything that comes through before that nuisance space pirate."

He saluted and blinked out, the holoscreen spreading into a full high definition image of Yobi's terrified face. Socket leered at the raichu and pursed her lips.

"What are you waiting around for?" she spat. "You're dismissed! Go!"

The screen blinked out before the pokemon could even remember to salute. The gothitelle turned away from the screen to look out of the window. Even from this distance she thought she could see the hull of Wildcard Gamma in the sky, but it was nothing more than a large, grey cloud.

She turned back to the holoscreen and tapped through her contacts list until she found the one she was looking for. It jingled out a jaunty tune while the dialing icon danced from side to side, a little too cheerful for her liking, until it cut out and was replaced with the concerned face of a zigzagoon.

"Socket?" she asked. "How can I help you?"

"Surge," said Socket. "How is the pursuit of Hunter progressing?"

Surge scratched her ear beneath her bandana and glanced away. "He keeps slipping out of my grip."

Socket pursed her lips together. "Shame. He's interfered with my work yet again, so I'd appreciate it if things sped up a bit. Is the laser not reliable enough for you?"

"Oh, it's fine!"

"Did you miss your target?"

"I never miss my target." Surge gave her a reassuring smile. "Just give me a little more time and he'll be behind bars before you know it."

"Make sure he is," said Socket. "Dead or alive."

She hung up and Surge's face vanished back into the desk. Once again, she turned back to her window and strolled over to her own desk. Her claws brushed a pile of paperwork and she slid the top sheet aside to reveal the morbid photo of a molten magnezone.

' *I never miss my target!* '

Of course, there was no evidence to state that Surge was responsible for the massacre of a magnezone's police fleet. The fact it coincided with Hunter's raid on yet another data chip did leave a bitter taste in her mouth, and gave her doubts. Had the mawile acquired a fire laser, or was Surge actually responsible? She needed to get onto interrogating that stubborn croagunk.

She looked away from the photo and stared up at the sky. Space pirates. The very bane of her existence, costing her countless hours of sleep.

It was going to be a long night, and the office was oddly quiet. She wished desperately Tweak would hurry up with her coffee.

…

Switch had been silent for some time, sitting with his beak hanging open as he stared at the floor. Macro's explanation had long since ended and he was growing restless, much like the rest of his crew. Anchor hummed to himself as he watched the sky roll by; DL sat against the wall a few feet away from the talonflame looking rather shaken up; Matrix, however, had loaded up a retro eight-bit tennis-style game on his computer, minimizing the navigation system into the top right corner.

"This is all a lot to take in," Switch finally said, although not for the first time. "This Socket… you said she's mayor of System?"

Macro nodded. "Yup."

"And she's wanting to do to me - or any other human - exactly what she's done to DL?" Switch nodded to the pachirisu who flinched at the sound of her name.

"Except, unlike her, Socket can legally destroy your memories and personality," said Macro. "So if I were you, I'd keep your human form on the down-low."

Switch closed his eyes and sighed. "So if this is System… it's many many years ahead of my time line and very few even know humans ever existed here. I have my suspicions on why she wants a human, but… why go out of her way to get one?"

"If I were to guess," said Anchor, scratching his chin, "I'd say it's 'cos back then, humans generally were stuck in a pokemon form. They aren't pokemon, though, so turning them into a living computer would be legal and the perfect disguise."

Switch spread his wings in a shrug. "But why not just build an android? Why use a living computer?"

"Androids can malfunction," said Macro. "They also need charging up and regular maintenance. You can just feed a biological body and let it sleep. Much more cost effective."

Anchor nodded to Macro. "Got brains, this one."

"Well, it's abhorrent!" said Switch. "What if she doesn't just stop at me, either? What if she decides to farm back into the pre-Fracture time line and drag all the humans through?"

Macro scratched the base of his horn and exchanged glances with Anchor and Matrix.

"I hadn't thought of that," he said.

The other two shook their heads and Matrix returned to his game.

"Socket doesn't have much of an opinion for any species she sees as having a lower status," Macro went on. "Humans would mean nothing to her, just like the water dwelling pokemon. I wouldn't be surprised if she does farm humans through to this time line just like they yank those water dwellers out of their homes."

Switch's beak fell open. "What does she do with the water dwellers?"

"Turns them into meat," Macro spat.

Switch turned so pale Macro feared he might faint. The talonflame raised a wing to his face and closed his eyes.

"I… I can't even process that," he said.

"What?" Macro scoffed. "They didn't eat meat in your time line?"

"No, they did not." He tucked his wing back to his side and met Macro's glare. "Which fool altered that law? Because the way I see it, it's cannibalism."

"I don't know," said Macro. "That law was in place long before I hatched. Just be glad you ain't a fish." He turned back towards the windscreen and kicked his feet up. "Besides, you have a healthy outlook on that matter. I won't have any cannibals on my ship."

"Speaking of ships." Matrix drew the mawile's attention. "That stalker of ours is back."

Macro muttered under his breath and pulled himself from his seat, watching the blinking red dot on the screen. Was it Surge again? If so, then why was she following him so intently? There was no saying it was, however. It could be anyone after his head.

"Stalker?" Switch peered over the ribombee's shoulder.

"Aye," said Macro. "It happens a lot. Even more so as of late."

"You said this DL was meant to go to Socket," said Switch. "Have you considered they might be tracking her somehow?"

Macro looked up into Switch's golden eyes then glanced towards DL. She stared back at him, still huddled against the wall. A tracking chip? No, he'd not considered that.

"Every pokemon in System has a data chip," he told Switch. "It contains your name, hatch date, species, gender, age, place of birth. All that stuff. But it can't track your movements. Tracking chips are

illegal, they go against pokemon rights. Surely Socket wouldn't break the law, right? Since DL is still a pokemon? She still has her rights."

"Can you scan her chip?" Switch asked.

He expanded out into his human form again, eliciting a small squeak from Matrix, and reached into one of his many pockets to pull out a large pocket computer that he needed both hands to hold. In one fluid motion, he ran it past DL's small body and looked down at the screen.

"Same kind," he said almost to himself. "It still scans."

"They've been using them for decades," said Macro. "We all have one."

"Yes, but hers is strange. It has her name as Download Database. Is that her real name? Because it sounds odd even for System."

Macro and Anchor peered down at the screen. Even Matrix abandoned his game to hover over the human's head. On the screen were the details one would expect from a chip scan. It had DL's gender, age, even her photograph. It had Meta City as her place of hatching and residence, which surprised Macro since Meta City was primarily inhabited by psychic and normal type pokemon. Most other species were shunned unless they shared a type with one of the other two and treated it as their primary type.

"Does this look authentic?" Switch asked.

"Pretty much," said Macro. "Except…"

"I don't like it," said Matrix. "Her name is her computer name, right? And Meta City as her place of hatching? Electric types don't live there."

Anchor grunted and nodded. "Sounds like a cover-up to me."

"It's either been modified or faked." Matrix scratched between his antennae. "With all the ships that have been following us, I'm leaning towards the latter."

"All right." Switch placed his computer back into his pocket. "Do you have a medical kit?"

"Why would my ship have a medical kit?" Macro asked. "We're not doctors."

"For emergencies?"

"You're planning on removing her chip, aren't you?" A small smirk tugged at Macro's lips. "Not in my cockpit, pal. I ain't cleaning up any blood."

"Wait, what?" DL hugged her fluffy tail to her chest. "You're wanting to operate on me now?"

Macro placed a paw on his hip. "What's the problem?"

"I'm still trying to come to terms with everything you've just said!" She shook her head. "Humans… living computers… and now you think I'm being tracked?"

"All that stuff about humans and computers should have been in your databases," said Macro.

"Well it wasn't!" said DL. "Not in such details! I don't know anything about what her plans are prior to obtaining her beloved computer, but it's like… I'm just some prototype until something 'better' comes along! A waste! She removed everything about me… for this?" She waved a paw at Switch.

The human frowned slightly and pushed the button on his watch, returning to the smaller and more agreeable form of a talonflame. Regardless, DL just cowered behind her tail and stared at the wall.

"I don't think she likes me," said Switch.

Macro grunted and climbed back into his seat. "We'll head to Pulse City. She can have the chip removed there easy peasy. Then we'll figure out what to do with you, Switch."

The talonflame shuffled over to Anchor's other side and gazed out of the window with his beak slightly ajar. Floating cities sped past them amongst the fluffy white and grey clouds, all the while with their stalker following at a steady pace behind them.

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 18

A/N - Thanks for all faves and follows! =D

Chapter Eighteen

BackDoor hovered at a safe distance from the fleet of porygon z as they traveled back and forth in the blackness of System Sky's north east corner. He had no idea what Yobi had been thinking when he designed Zero Day. The raichu had clearly incorporated the old data from the lone 'Porygon' of many centuries past, along with its upgrade 'Porygon 2' who sported a much sleeker design than its retro eight-bit predecessor. However, these things looked like they'd had their limbs pulled part, held in place by nothing more than an electromagnetic force. Their heads flopped and lolled about above their bodies, capable of turning a full three-sixty as they surveyed the area. Their three limbs seemed attached, but the two at the front moved around their torso along some invisible track. Much like BackDoor, their antennae was hidden away inside them, most likely their 'tail' which bobbed about like a rudder, steering the monstrosities through space.

One of them turned its bird-like face onto him, fixing him with crazed yellow eyes ever so briefly before turning back to inspect some blank canvas. To anyone else, it was merely looking around, but he'd received its message loud and clear.

' *D1m3nssssi0n L0kated. W0rLd - unkn0wn.* '

Ridiculous things couldn't even speak properly. It sounded like some kind of incoherent, high-pitched buzz like a bug pokemon trying to speak with only its wings.

' *What do you mean 'world - unknown'?* ' he shot back.

' *Th4t issszz f0r y0u t0 inssp3kt. 0ur j0b isss d0n3.* '

The rest of Zero Day bobbed backwards and their bodies jerked erratically, sending their heads spinning with an audible whir. Their tinny voices chimed in 'd0n3! Itssss d0n3!' over and over until BackDoor was forced to grit his teeth and rush towards them, waving his paws in protest.

"All right! I get it! Back off!"

The porygon z turned their heads simultaneously towards him and their eyes swirled with a yellow light.

' *Thr34t d3t3kt3d! Thr34t d3t3kt3d!* '

Tri-coloured beams shot from their faces straight at him and he let out a small yelp and dropped below them.

"Cut that out!" he barked.

With a wave of his paw, Zero Day were swallowed in a shadowy void and reappeared several feet away. Their bodies and heads still jerked unnaturally but they turned tail and drifted further away through System Sky.

Silence filled his mind once more and he turned back towards the 'unknown world'.

"Morons," he muttered.

The government fleet that had been waiting a good mile away at least began to move in, their golden hulls glittering in the starlight. Curiosity had clearly got the better of them, venturing closer regardless of the risk Zero Day's impromptu return might pose. Those things were like carvannha, savaging anything that encroached on their territory that wasn't one of them. It was like their eyes just couldn't recognise what their mechanical brains could.

BackDoor span in a circle, cutting into the 'unknown world' with a golden light. It spread out into a glowing ring and the inside

immediately softened into a watery substance. It swirled slowly, picking up speed until it gave off an ultraviolet light. His face split into a large grin and he bobbed backwards away from it, just in time for the fleet to arrive and snap up whatever unfortunate creature dared to come through it.

' *Any idea what world this is?* ' a disembodied voice called from one of the ships, right into his head.

' *No clue,' he replied. 'Just like the other countless times.* '

' *Well, I don't know about you, but I really hope it's not prehistoric times. I really don't want to wrestle with a tyrunt again.* '

BackDoor rolled his eyes. ' *It was one tiny dinosaur! Good grief!* '

' *Tiny?! I have you know that thing could have smooshed me with its foot!* '

BackDoor couldn't help but laugh. A tiny electric rodent, crushed beneath the foot of an extinct creature. It was perfect.

Tinkling laughter came from the void almost matching his own. The hoopa's humour died in his throat and his grin slowly melted away. A long, silvery tentacle reached from the tear, followed by another, then another. A couple of the government ships fell back while one dared to draw closer, the nozzle atop it glowing with a pink light.

' *BackDoor?* ' the voice that reached him this time was different, deeper. ' *We don't like the look of this. Do you think you can close it?* '

Another tentacle snaked through, groping at the emptiness around it. BackDoor bobbed closer, but before he could reach it, a silvery white mass broke through, spreading itself out as the vortex propelled it forwards into something akin to a tentacruel. The jellyfish-like creature let its tentacles droop back down again and it remained

stationary as it tried to take in its surroundings, although how was a mystery since the creature lacked any visible eyes.

BackDoor threw himself backwards and grinned once more, clapping his mitten paws together.

"Are you guys seeing this?!" he shrieked. "This is awesome! So awesome!"

Flashes of pink flew from the closest ship, striking the creature on its head. It raised one of its tentacles to deflect the next blast then brought it down onto the ship. Metal creaked and splintered as the tentacle snaked around it, crushing the ship until it was unrecognizable. The golden vehicle was launched over the heads of the remaining ships, many of which turned tail and fled, leaving their comrades to deal with the aberration.

BackDoor clapped his paws again and pointed at the jellyfish. "Are you seeing this?! She's got to use this one! She's got to!"

He laughed jovially and turned his back on the monster. Its tinkling cries filled the air as the fleet took aim, shooting at its head and flailing limbs. Socket's face filled the space before BackDoor and he grinned widely.

"What is it, BackDoor?" she scoffed. "This had better be good, I was just having my supper."

"Oh it's good, all right! Look at this!" He pointed a paw behind him and Socket's expression turned from pensive to shock. "I think we've found you a winner!"

…

Socket watched in sheer horror as the tentacled beast decimated two more members of her fleet. The ships that got too close to the void in their bid to stop the creature were whisked out of System Sky into the unknown. Every chain thrown at the monstrosity was torn to

shreds and fell harmlessly away. The beast's tinkling voice filled her office with a deafening intensity. BackDoor's face was twisted into a euphoric grin as he looked from Socket to the massacre and back.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" he said. "My data readout tells me it's some species of pokemon!"

"It's not one I've ever seen!" Socket gasped out. "Send it back this instant!"

"Aww come on!" The hoopa's feigned pout turned her blood cold. "Give this thing a chance! I'd say it's a billion times better than a human. They're more like super pokemon!" He rubbed his chin with his paw. "No, hang on… I can do better than that… ultra beasts!"

"You told me it's a pokemon," she said. "Whether or not it's from our world, the law would still apply! Just because it's alien doesn't create a loop hole! Send it back! Now!"

Her eyes widened as something beyond the monstrosity tore her attention from the massacre. Tentacles reached out from the void, flailing as another jellyfish creature was dragged from its world into System Sky. The fleet reeled back from it into the first one's flailing limbs and one of the ships was swallowed up into its hidden maw.

"Ooh, another one!" BackDoor clapped his mitten-paws. "They must be some kind of race. Whatever they are, they're super amazing. Not like pokemon at all. I don't care what my read out says, I like them!"

"BackDoor, listen to me," said Socket. "Those things are dangerous. Even you are at risk. Stop them, and send them back."

He rolled his eyes and sighed. "All right, fine. Ruin all my fun."

The hoopa shot towards them and span in a corkscrew up their lashing tentacles, binding them in place with a golden thread. With a 'hup!' he tossed the first one back through the glowing gate. The next one met the same fate, soaring after its comrade.

BackDoor turned back to Socket and folded his paws. "There. You happy now? No ultra beasts for you!"

She stared over his shoulder and pointed a claw. One of the creature's tentacles reached back out from the void. The golden thread fell away like water as the beast was expelled once more. Its flailing limb swung down into the side of BackDoor's head and he vanished briefly from the holoscreen's display. He turned his frown onto the creature but it span away from him and took off into the blackness of System Sky.

"Why didn't you close the gate?!" Socket shrieked. "Quick! Before the other one comes back through!"

BackDoor shot towards the void and snapped his claws. The void closed with a sucking sound just as another tentacle reached through. Tinkling screams filled the air as the tentacle was cut away, leaving a stream of purple blood as it dropped towards the ocean below.

The hoopa let out a whistle and looked after the escaping creature. He turned back to Socket and grinned widely.

"Oops?" He shrugged.

Socket's nose crinkled in a frown. She clenched her paws so tightly her claws cut into her pads. The little wretch…

"Oops?" she spat.

He shook his head and gave her a chilling smile. "We all make mistakes."

…

Pulse City's hospital ward was a small building situated just outside the busiest part of the city centre. It was an area reserved for helping the space pirates inhabitants, mostly consisting of apartment blocks,

hotels and small super markets. Despite the contrast with the bustling entertainment centre and black market, it managed to blend in by keeping the same atmosphere. Billboards advertising the latest gadgets and video games were spammed over the tall buildings. Even the hospital had its own fair share of adverts. The walls were painted chrome and black, and the inside lacked the pristine white of the rest of System's hospitals. In fact, it was grey. Clean (shockingly) but grey.

Macro perched on a seat just outside the minor surgery ward, leaning forwards on his knees as he kept one eye on the closed door. Anchor sat beside him humming to himself while scrolling over the screen of his wrist computer. Matrix had refused to stay, agreeing with Switch that hospitals made him uncomfortable so the pair had instead gone to the Moonlight Lounge to play Assassin Strike.

Hospitals made Macro uncomfortable as well, but he was adamant to stay. There was no way he was going to let DL wake up to find herself alone in the oppressive place. If it weren't for her overreaction to having a small incision made in her left arm, they wouldn't have had to put her under in the first place. They would have been in and out by now with just a few stitches and the reassurance they wouldn't be able to be tracked any more. But no, she just had to be terrified of sharp objects.

The door opened and the smiling face of a mienfoo peered out at them.

"All done," he said. "She's starting to wake up but she'll be groggy for a while."

Macro grunted and pushed himself to his feet. The two space pirates trudged into the ward after the surgeon. The mienfoo nodded to the sleeping pachirisu who looked impossibly small in the large, low bed. No discrimination in Pulse City, everything had to be accessible to everyone. That meant all beds were designed for pokemon the size of a tyranitar and as such they drowned the smaller species.

"Here it is." The mienfoo held out his paw. "We removed the old chip like you asked and replaced it with a new one using the details you gave me."

The tiny microchip lay between his paw pads, both inconspicuous and ominous at the same time. Macro took it in his claws and held it up to the light.

"Huh," he said. "Looks every bit like your everyday chip."

"I think that's the point," said Anchor, still messing with his wrist computer.

"Well, it'll be no use to Socket anymore," said Macro. "Just a few minor adjustments and it'll never work again."

He dropped the chip to the floor and stamped on it.

It stared back up at him without so much as a scratch.

The mawile frowned and tried again. And again.

"What is this thing made of?" he said. "Steelix hide?"

Anchor brushed him aside and rammed his paw into the tile. When he stood back up, the microchip lay crushed to dust.

"Huh…" Macro scratched his scar.

Anchor nodded at him. "You're welcome."

"What was that noise?" DL's groggy voice was somewhat incoherent and she sat up slowly, rubbing at her head.

"Don't worry," said Macro. "It was just Anchor being a brute."

The granbull didn't look up from his computer. "Well, I am good at it."

A small smile played at her lips and she turned her sleepy brown eyes back onto Macro's. Warmth spread through his chest as though someone had dipped his heart in chocolate fondue.

"How are you feeling?" His voice came out oddly weak and he diverted his gaze to the wall.

DL sat up fully and brushed her blue lock of fur back from her eyes. "I have a bit of a headache."

"That's normal," said the mienfoo.

Macro had almost forgot the surgeon was there. The fighting pokemon busied about beside the pachirisu as he filled a glass of water. She gratefully accepted it and gulped it down loudly.

"I'll have them send in some light breakfast," he said. "And I'll check on you again later on. Okay?"

Before any of them could respond, the mienfoo trotted from the ward and the doors swung loosely back and forth behind him.

"Refreshments aren't a bad idea, actually." Anchor finally looked up from his computer and turned to Macro. "Do you want anything?"

Macro narrowed his eyes. "You're seriously gonna buy something from that overpriced hospital cafe?"

Anchor shrugged. "I'm parched. Besides, hospitals have gotta make money somehow, Cap'n."

"I think they've made enough off us." Macro folded his arms. "That procedure was alarmingly expensive and DL doesn't exactly have health insurance."

The pachirisu sank down into the sheets and glanced towards the wide window.

"All right, fine. I'll meet you at Moonlight Lounge." Anchor stomped towards the door.

The huge double doors swung back and forth with much more force than the mienfoo's exit. It crossed Macro's mind to stop them before they broke their hinges but DL's plaintive whimper drew his mind away from them.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"For what?" he asked.

"That you've had to pay for this…" She absently rubbed at the invisible stitches. "I… I'll pay you back." She clenched her jaw and glanced back to the window. "Somehow…"

"Look." Macro moved over to her and flopped into a small plastic chair. "You don't have to pay me back. It wasn't much."

"You said it was 'alarmingly expensive'."

He grimaced. She'd even used air quotes.

"I will pay you back," she said. "But… I don't have money. How about I work for you?"

He looked up with a start. "Work for me?"

"Yes. But rather than pay me, just keep everything until it's completely paid back."

"So… you want to be a space pirate?" He raised an eyebrow as she nodded then looked back down at his paws. "Wow. I guess I really do need to get you a gun."

"I can pay you back for that, too," she said.

"Don't bother. I'm sure I can get one without paying. I might have to chase up some favors." He slipped from the seat and gave her what

he hoped was a reassuring smile. "I'll be back in an hour or so. Hopefully by then the doctor will have discharged you."

"I hope so." She hugged the sheet to her chest and glanced around the room. "I don't really like hospitals, and this one is oddly grey."

"Really?" Macro looked up at the bare walls. "I rather like it. Much less blinding when you're coming out of a deep sleep."

She chuckled, causing a small smile to play at his lips. He waved and pushed himself through the swinging doors.

His first stop would have to be Moonlight Lounge. He strongly doubted Worm would want to return any favors after he'd refused to sell him any coils. And even if he did sell him a gun, if he knew the sewaddle like he thought he did then it would very likely be missing its key component as a way of getting back at him.

Macro glanced over the pirates he passed, grouped in doorways engaged in drunken banter or bickering. A majority of them were rock, ground or dragon type pokemon with a couple of scrafty and scraggy mixed among them. Some of the pirates fixed him with a pointed glare that he met with as much confidence as he could muster. None of them made any advancement. The dragon types wouldn't have stood a chance and the rock and ground types knew exactly what lasers he was packing.

Moonlight Lounge was as busy as it always was. Voices and sweat hit him like a wrecking ball no sooner he stepped through the door. He spotted Worm's small green body on the bar instantly. The bug pokemon had his nose buried in a shot glass while the stunky runt sat beside him cheered him on.

"Good morning, Worm." Macro leant on the bar beside the sewaddle.

Worm looked up from his shot glass with a start and frowned. "You just ruined my record."

"By two seconds!" The stunky sipped at his own drink and smirked.

Macro raised an eyebrow at Worm. "I thought you already beat that last month."

"Well, it doesn't hurt to better yourself." Worm nudged his glass towards the bartender. "Same again, Bit."

Macro waved the mienshao before he could scurry away. "Occa and shuca cocktail for me."

Worm's brow furrowed and he tapped his tail on the counter. "I hope you're not expecting me to pay, Macro."

The mawile waved a paw and closed his eyes. "Never expected that for a second."

"Good. 'Cos you're buyin'." Worm jabbed Macro in the chest with a stubby leg.

The mawile absently brushed down his scarf and reached into his pouch just as the bartender returned with their orders. He slammed a ten credit bill onto the bar and Worm chuckled.

"You're too easy sometimes." The sewaddle pawed at his glass. "Or… are you just after something?"

Macro let out a single laugh and sipped his drink. "Maybe."

"Oh, here we go. You stiff your old pal on coils that pirates have been demandin' off me, even throwing threats, and now you want something."

Macro sipped his drink again. "You didn't manage to get hold of any?"

"No. I did not. Those things are like gold these days."

"So there's no sense in me cadging a laser off you then?"

"What do you want one for?" Worm eyed him up and down then frowned at his belt. "You already got two. Or are they in need of replacing?"

"It's not for me." Macro picked up his drink and scanned over the bar. "Guess I'll snoop somewhere else. See you later, Worm. Good luck beating your record."

The sewaddle tutted and turned back to his glass. The little stunky's cheers started up and then were drowned in the chaos of the lounge.

"Oi, Macro!"

Macro stopped and looked around at the various pokemon. A familiar pink paw waved at him from a shaded booth. The small table was rather crowded. Anchor sat between a gabite and magmar while a bisharp sat a safe distance away on a metal stool. Any sign of bitterness had vanished from Anchor's face, but Macro put that down to his beer.

He recognised the gabite as a Moonlight Lounge regular, but the magmar and bisharp were completely unfamiliar. A pile of dice lay scattered in the middle of the table along with credit coins and bills.

"We're playin' farkle," Anchor told him. "You in?"

A slow smirk spread across Macro's face which he hid behind his glass. Farkle… that might be an opportunity to win a few credits and maybe con one of the other players out of a laser. He looked over the strangers again, trying to work out what their lasers might be. He could rule out the bisharp. His paws were blades, rendering a laser completely useless. If he used any modified weapons they'd be cutting ones.

"All right." Macro pulled himself up into the chair beside the gabite, spilling some of his cocktail on the leather seat much to the land dragon's disgust. "Count me in."

The magmar's beak twisted into a sneer and he tapped the pile of credits. "You want in, you pay."

Macro reached into his pouch. He didn't often keep loose credits on him. He'd have to make sure he won if he was going to stay in the game long enough to get what he wanted, and he could guarantee the magmar would have it. He met the fire pokemon's eyes and tossed a ten credit bill onto the pile, all the while keeping his own personal dice hidden in his paw.

"Cheapskate," the magmar muttered as he gathered the scattering of dice together.

Macro pretended he hadn't heard him, but kept his eyes on the magmar as he tossed the white dice across the table. They clattered, rolled and bounced until they came at a stop near the small pile of credits. Two fours, two twos and a three. The magmar's snout creased and he shot Anchor a leer as the granbull jotted down the magmar's score.

Macro chuckled under his breath. Ones mattered in this game, as did fives. And it was preferable to roll three or more of any number, although those were the most preferable.

The bisharp went next, neatly flicking the dice up onto one bladed claw and tossing them into the air like tiny pancakes. They pattered across the table, revealing a score of three sixes and two ones. The steel type thrust a blade into the air in a cheer and scooped the dice along to Macro.

"Full house," said Anchor. "Nice."

The bisharp closed his eyes in a smile.

Macro pursed his lips together as he took them into one paw. Using his trump dice right now was too much of a risk. He would have to rely on sheer luck.

He rolled the dice across the table and watched in anticipation as they landed on two fives a one and two fours. Well, it wasn't terrible.

He set the one aside and re-rolled the rest of the dice. Three fives and a four. He could re-roll the four… but it probably wouldn't do much good. He banked the fives and passed them along to the gabite.

The gabite completely failed his throw, not rolling a single scoring dice. He slammed them down before Anchor who had his own turn. After successfully rolling four threes and a one, he let out a sigh and waved a paw at the bisharp.

The bladed pokemon scooped all the credits towards himself with a gleeful squeal.

Macro narrowed his eyes and leant his head on his paw. If he was going to stand any chance of winning this and conning the magmar out of his laser, he was going to have to up his game. He wondered how long he could go without using the trio of loaded dice. He kept them locked in his fist, holding them so the sixes were against his paw. Hopefully that would send the weights towards them and roll him a constant nice set of ones when the time came.

Three turns and a lot of trash talking later, Macro was down fifty credits, despite the win on his third go. He begrudgingly watched as the bisharp scooped his winnings together and poured them into his bag.

"Off already?" the magmar grunted.

"Places to be," said the steel type. "Besides, I don't want to risk losing a decent streak."

Macro quickly checked the time on his optical display. It had almost been an hour since he left the hospital. He really needed to get back and collect DL. He let out a sigh and watched as Anchor passed the dice along to the magmar.

"Come on! Give me some hot dice for once!" The magmar unleashed the dice onto the table and rammed his paw into his face as each and every one stopped on an unscoring number. "You have to be kidding me!"

Macro laughed and leant across the table to retrieve them.

"This really isn't your day is it?" he quipped.

"It ain't yours either," said the magmar. "And it really won't be at all if you don't watch that mouth."

Macro caught the gabite's leer as he silently chewed on the end of a thin bone. Where had he got that from? Macro didn't even want to know.

The mawile quickly threw the dice, slipping his own in with sleight of paw. The real dice remained clasped in his other paw and he watched with anticipation as three dice showed ones and the other two showed fours. He snatched the two fours back, deeply relieved that they were considerably lighter than the three he'd been holding. That meant his loading had worked. He tossed them, landing on a five and another one.

Macro fist pumped the air with a 'yes!' and gathered the dice back jubilantly. The gabite and magmar groaned audibly. Macro subtly switched out the three heavier dice for the originals as he pushed them towards the dragon pokemon.

The gabite snorted as he took the dice. "If you'd not been doing such a sloppy job, I'd be suspicious."

Macro chuckled and tucked his paws behind his head, watching as the five dice bounced along the table to land the gabite on a one, three fives and a six. The dragon took the opportunity to re-roll the six, landing himself another five. He shoved them towards Anchor with a grunt.

The granbull didn't even look up at Macro as he had his own roll, which he completely failed. He leant across the table and shoved the winnings towards Macro with his left arm. The mawile snatched it up with glee and tossed fifty credits into the middle of the table.

"Oh come on!" The magmar threw his arms in the air. "How am I meant to meet that?"

"I'm out." The gabite leant back in his seat and looked up at the ceiling. "I ain't wastin' another credit."

Macro felt a smirk spread across his face. "You could always bet your weapons?"

"Sod that," said the gabite. "You fairy types are the bane of my existence. I ain't travellin' around without protection."

"Me neither." The magmar met Macro's eyes with a frown. "What use would mine be to you anyway? You already have water and grass lasers."

Macro shrugged. "Can't hurt to have a backup. Besides." He grinned. "Don't you want to try and win everything back?"

The magmar met his grin with a scowl. With a defeated sigh, he reached into his belt and tossed a green-tinted laser into the middle of the table. Fifty credits from Anchor joined it and the magmar took the dice and tossed them into the air.

They rained down in a combination of three sixes and two fives.

Macro's heart hit his stomach. He stared at the dice with his mouth ajar.

"Full house! 'Bout time!" the magmar roared.

He shoved the dice towards Macro.

The mawile gathered them together, switching them out for two of his own dice as subtly as he could. He had to play it safe and make sure his score wouldn't come across as remotely suspicious. Three ones on his first turn might raise some eyebrows and earn him some pointed claws (and maybe even a new scar). He might very well roll three ones in the end result. But if he couldn't roll something else decent to best the magmar's score then he was going to lose miserably, and miss out on getting a free laser.

He grit his teeth together and tossed the dice, scoring two ones, two fours and a three. He gathered the unscoring dice, slipped out one for his remaining loaded dice and rolled again. The dice pattered across the table, landing at another one a four and a six.

With a heavy sigh, he took the four and six and clenched them in his paw. The magmar was beginning to look worried, and all three pairs of eyes were on him now. He tossed the dice into the air and let them fall. One of them span on its corner for a moment before landing flat beside the other scoring dice. Another one and a six.

A huge grin spread across Macro's face and the magmar threw his arms into the air with a roar.

Macro quickly retrieved the pile, dragging the dice back towards him. With a quick and practiced sleight of paw, he gathered them up, switching out for the real ones and tossed them towards Anchor.

"Well done, Cap'n," said the granbull.

Macro chuckled as he poured the credits into his pouch. "Pleasure playin' with ya!" He slipped from the seat and tossed the laser in his paw. "And thanks for the new toy."

"You're leaving?!" The magmar rose to his feet and heat radiated from his body. "I don't think so. You're gonna give me a chance to win that back."

"No can do," said Macro. "I won it fair and square. Besides, I gotta get back to the hospital. I'm picking someone up."

"Can't do that with broken arms."

The magmar reached down to grab Macro by the horn, but Anchor's huge paw slammed down on his assailant's. The magmar took a step back, meeting the granbull's cold eyes.

"Fine," the magmar spat. "Whatever."

The fire pokemon fell back down in his seat, drawing an apologetic look from the gabite.

"Go quick," Anchor whispered to Macro. "I'll meet you back at the ship."

Macro turned to leave but was stopped as Anchor added;

"Oh, and Cap'n?"

He looked back over his shoulder.

"I want my money back," said Anchor close to his ear. "Can't say I approve of you using your deceiving ways against your own crew."

Macro winked and turned to trot from the lounge.

…

Please R&R =D

Chapter 19

Chapter Nineteen

The holoscreen's ringing display vanished to be replaced with Yobi. He didn't look up straight away, too busy faffing with whatever he was building. Socket tapped her foot irritably and cleared her throat, dragging the sparksurfer raichu's attention from his work to her. His heavily ringed and bloodshot eyes widened slightly and he stuttered.

"Apologies, Madam Mayor." He brushed the unseen item aside. "You caught me at a bad time."

Socket narrowed her eyes and he glanced away, immediately regretting his words.

"I think you'll find this is much more urgent," she said. "That foolish robot you built has gone and unleashed what I can only describe as a potential catastrophe on System."

"Potential?" he asked.

"So word hasn't got back to you from my decimated troops?" She folded her arms and met his confused look with a leer. "I believe BackDoor's name for the abhorrent creature is an 'ultra beast'. A pokemon from another world that went berserk and trashed several of my ships. He managed to get them both back into their own world, but one escaped just before he closed the void."

"So it was an accident?"

"Oh I'd be more inclined to say the silly android wanted to keep one as a pet! I wouldn't be remotely surprised if he actually allowed the to creature escape."

Yobi scratched behind his ear and sighed. "What did this thing look like?"

"What does that matter?!"

"It matters a lot if we're going to retrieve it, Madam Mayor."

She grit her teeth together and seethed. "A rather out-of-place alien that resembles some kind of mutant tentacruel."

The raichu nodded his understanding and glanced towards his work.

"How do you suggest we retrieve it?" she asked. "Since it's your silly invention that went and released the wretched beast."

He scratched his ear again. "If it's too dangerous to send your own troops, then… we could use Zero Day?"

"Zero Day are far too busy searching for time pockets."

"Well, if you can hang on another few days I'll have this android up and running and it can track down this creature and apprehend it."

"Apprehend?"

He raised his paws and shook his head. "Only until BackDoor sends it back."

"And if he refuses?"

"Short his circuits." Yobi retrieved his work along with a screwdriver. "Unfortunately that's our only option since you requested he not have an 'off' switch."

She pursed her lips together and spoke with a dangerous air that set the raichu's fur on end.

"Are you insinuating that this is my fault Yobi?"

He looked up with a start and shook his head, but his eyes gave away his answer. "No… not at all, Madam Mayor. This is just an unfortunate accident."

"I hope for your sake you aren't lying." She tapped her claws along her arm. "And what of Download Database? Any joy in cutting her off from the network?"

"Like I said, it can't be done. But… I do have an idea."

"Humor me."

"We install a worm." He looked up again and put down his screwdriver. "One that shuts her down until it's removed, which should be long enough to retrieve her. No damage to her brain or the Download Database."

Socket looked down at her feet and nodded. "How long will that take?"

"It might take a couple of days to make a harmless worm," he said.

"We don't have a couple of days."

"But speeding things up could be risky."

"Set your little project aside for now and let's focus on getting that space pirate out of my fur."

Yobi yawned and dropped his screwdriver. "I'll do what I can."

"And get some sleep," she added as she hung up.

…

The tiny onion-like form of TimeSkip glided elegantly a good couple of meters or so ahead of BackDoor. The tight curves it took as it followed the invisible signal given out by the time pockets were proving difficult for the hoopa to maneuver. He let out a growl and zipped along to cut the celebi off before it took yet another turn.

"Just point," he said.

The celebi fixed its lifeless eyes on his and raised a gangly limb, pointing one of its stubby claws to the spot behind the hoopa's head.

He turned on the spot and let out a 'huh'. TimeSkip slipped past him and darted ahead another few feet before stopping beside the invisible time pocket.

BackDoor grinned and zig-zagged over to it. A ring of light spread out, filling up with the swirling ultraviolet mist. Then he dropped his paw, staring into the nothingness.

"How many years back did you say this is?" he asked.

TimeSkip sent a spray of binary code into his mind that translated to 'One thousand and seven years.'

"So there'd be humans back there, right?" He frowned and folded his arms. "From the databases I have, not many humans could fly like that talonflame we dragged through. They'd all be on the ground."

TimeSkip merely met his eyes but said nothing.

"So… opening time holes in the sky is…" He waved a paw. "Pointless." He chuckled and shook his head. "Socket's such a moron."

The celebi looked from the swirling void to BackDoor.

"You know what? I'm gonna decide you agree with me."

The hoopa span in the air, closing the void. He turned back to TimeSkip and placed a mitten paw on his chin as he turned his attention to the ocean below.

"When System was apparently filled with humans, they were sick. That meant they would have filled hospitals, right?"

TimeSkip bobbed over to his side and followed his gaze to System Ground.

"Every time pocket we open reveals the exact same place but at a different time," he said. "Yeh, they might very well drag things through with gravity, but if we want more accuracy then we're gonna have to break some rules."

TimeSkip looked up at him again. Its eyes were as emotionless as its limited binary voice. Even if it did have something to say, it could do nothing more than answer a few basic commands.

BackDoor placed a paw on its head and laughed.

"Come on, TimeSkip. We're gonna visit Central Meta Hospital. The chances of finding a human there would be boosted greatly." He waved a paw, bringing up a small swirling vortex. "Socket's gonna love us when we hand her a hoard of humans, right?"

He grabbed TimeSkip's paw and dragged it after him into the swirling ultraviolet light. The vortex closed behind them, reopening just above Meta City.

The streets were bustling with life as pokemon went back and forth from shops and office blocks. Right in the centre stood Socket's mansion. Work and home. The hoopa lifted his head to look beyond it. A mile or so beyond her office stood Central Meta Hospital. There was no saying the hospital would be the same one it was one thousand years ago, and if it were there was no saying the layout would be the same.

Another vortex and the two androids were floating above the pristine white building. Sirens filled the air as two ambulances pulled out of the parking lot and hovered along the streets before rising into the sky. They didn't see the two androids, but BackDoor watched curiously as the ambulances vanished beyond the skyscrapers.

He turned his attention back to the hospital, scanning over the vibrant signs. Each department was colour coded. Red for accident and emergency. Purple for quarantining contagious diseases. Neither of those would be likely to take him to the humans, and

Socket would have his head if he brought back a contagious pokemon and unleashed an epidemic into System. He chuckled, briefly considering doing that just for the fun of it.

"What department do you think we want?" he asked the celebi.

TimeSkip looked up at the sign but, as usual, said nothing.

BackDoor let out a groan and slammed his paw into his forehead. "This is so boring! It's huge! Where am I meant to go?"

'Searching for time pockets.'

The binary took him by surprise. TimeSkip's eyes glazed over with a flat, green light, and the celebi's wings hummed as it moved forwards over the large building.

'Pocket detected.'

The celebi took off like a dart.

"Finally!"

BackDoor did a small somersault and zoomed after the celebi. It was no easy feat to keep up. Why the silly onion fairy couldn't move in a straight line was anyone's guess.

…

DL's smile lit up the small ward. Macro faltered in the doorway and absently trailed his claws over the hilt of the 'new' laser poking out of his belt pouch.

"The doctor says you're ready?" he said.

DL nodded enthusiastically and trotted to his side. "You're a bit later than you said."

"I got caught up in something."

He turned and strolled from the room, leaving the pachirisu to catch up with him.

"What's the plan now?" she asked.

"We're meeting Anchor and the others back at the ship, then we're gonna track down your next memory."

She fell into pace beside him and scratched behind her ear. "Really?"

"You seem nervous." He gave her a sideways glance. "What's wrong?"

"I… I'm a little anxious."

"Really? I thought you'd want to get your memories back."

"I do, but…" She wrung her paws together. "I'm worried I'll remember… this whole…" She pawed at the antennae and grimaced.

"I doubt you'll remember having that put in. They wouldn't have done it while you were awake."

She shook her head. "Not that. The part leading up to it. Why? Did I agree to it? Or was it forced on me? That's what I don't want to know."

He stared at her for a moment then looked away to push through a door.

"I doubt you'd have agreed to it," he said. "I mean, who would want their entire memory wiped? Some memories, sure, we all have things we wish to forget. But the whole thing? No sane pokemon would want that."

"Who'd want any memory wiped?" DL asked. "I mean… they make us who we are, right? You learn from mistakes, so if you forget them

then you've not learned anything."

Macro looked at her again and his fur prickled as the image of a blazing building filled his mind. He shook his head sharply and barged out onto the street, letting the cold air wash over his body.

Her thickly furred feet pattered over the paving flags as she rushed to catch up with him. "Is something wrong?"

"I just want to get back to Wildcard Gamma," he said. "If you don't wanna get left behind, then keep up."

She muttered something under her breath as she joined his side again. "You can be really cold sometimes you know."

He chuckled. "You learn fast."

"Do you usually push others away? Or is it just me?"

"Oh, it's not just you. Space pirates aren't nice pokemon, DL." He spread his arms and span on the spot, fixing her with a playful smirk. "And you want to be one! How about that?" He turned and marched on ahead of her. "The general consensus is you look out for Number One. Your crew, significant other - should you choose to have one - and the safety of others all comes second. Or last, depending on your general world view."

"And what's your world view?"

He stopped and turned to face her. His eyes trailed from hers to the antennae poking out behind her left ear and he frowned.

"What do you think?" He turned and marched on again. "You might not have much memory of the world, DL, but Socket and those who reigned before her ruined it. The laws were meant to make things better but instead turned into an epic disaster. If you're too poor, you die. If you live in the water, you die. If you turn your back on the law and try to do something about it, you die. That's where space pirates

came from. We all decided we'd had enough and founded our own little civilization. Believe it or not, it grows every day but they also get caught every day and put to death." He grunted and tucked his paws behind his back. "I'd like to say it can't get any worse, but it can. Sooner or later, System Ground could be left to rot and those who can afford it will move to the skies and leave those who can't stranded to die in their own waste. And what if meat eaters decide they're bored of only munching on water dwellers and beg for more variety? What will it be next? Plant pokemon? Bugs? Or those who only eat berries?"

"I wouldn't worry about that," she said.

"Then rightly worry!" He walked backwards so he could face her. "I might be a steel type but I still have flesh like the water dwellers. And so do you!" He pointed. "You eat meat?"

She shook her head.

"Good." He turned to walk forwards again. "'Cos there's no room for meat eaters on my ship."

DL was silent for a while, but she kept her distance, no longer desiring to walk beside him. He balled his paws into fists so tight his claws pricked his pads. There really was no need to lash out at an innocent pachirisu, especially not one who'd fallen victim to Socket's craziness.

"Then why don't you do something about it?" she asked. "Why doesn't someone stop her?"

He relaxed his paws and let them fall at his sides. "You really think it would make a difference?"

"As far as I'm aware, it only takes something small to make a difference."

"Really? Well. If someone took out Socket, someone else would come along to take her place. And believe me, it's gonna take something bigger than a space pirate to make a change to this rotten world."

"Then we should all work together."

"Socket's already dealt with that one, DL. Is there anything about division in those files of yours?" He cast her a glance over his shoulder. "'Cos getting pokemon to work together ain't gonna be a task for the faint hearted. Not even in Pulse City. There's division here, too. Other types are merely tolerated."

Her body stiffened and her eyes flew wide open. She looked around at the buildings and space pirates then trotted to join his side. It was as if she hadn't even realised she didn't share the same type as him.

He sighed and shook his head, turning the corner to step onto the docks. The giant schooling wishiwashi stood proud beside a barboach ship. Anchor busied himself beside Wildcard Gamma, his head stuffed inside a hole in the hull.

"What's the problem?" Macro asked.

The granbull stood up suddenly and a huge clang echoed from the ship. He ducked out, rubbing between his ears.

"Cap'n!" He grinned weakly. "Think you might've given me a headache."

"What are you doing poking around inside the ship?" Macro asked.

Anchor turned back to the hole and aimed a tiny LED flashlight at its innards. "Checking for damage. I've been a little concerned after that fight at the secret government building where we found DL. But it looks like nothing got damaged, which is a relief. Just a loose wire that connects to the lights."

"Will it take you long to fix it?" Macro asked. "I'd like to get going."

"I ain't riskin' fixing it after two ciders, Cap'n. Besides, the hull needs repainting. We took a nasty scuff."

Macro followed Anchor's paw towards the tail of the ship. The blue paint had been scratched away to grey, taking a chunk of the final 'D' in the vibrant red 'Wildcard Gamma' away with it. He groaned and shook his head.

"So we're staying in Pulse City tonight?" he asked.

"Looks like it," said Anchor. "Nice excuse to eat out at least. Might wanna let Cookie know. Something sweet is coming out of that fan so he might be expecting us for dinner. I've already made reservations at the Moonlight Lounge."

"When did you do that?"

"About five minutes ago when I realised there was a loose wire."

Macro tutted and pulled out his computer. One quick message to Cookie was all it took to bring the brown slurpuff to the entrance hatch. He peered down at them with the saddest look Macro had ever seen on the chef, and he'd been there when Cookie had burnt a batch of chocolate waffles. He was less upset about his missing fur.

"You're really not having lunch here?" he whined. "I've made a cheri and chocolate gateau!"

Macro scratched his head and looked back at the bustling street. DL on the other paw licked her lips and fidgeted on the spot.

"Sorry, Cookie," said Macro. "More for you, huh?"

The slurpuff beamed and nodded his head. "I guess so!"

"Take the night off." Macro waved a paw. "Put up your feet and relax. Maybe join us in the Lounge?"

Cookie stiffened and glanced over his shoulder. "Erm… Too many pokemon for me, I'm afraid."

"All right." Macro shrugged. "See you later then."

The door began to hiss and DL trotted towards it with a cry of, "Save me a slice!"

A small smile tugged at Macro's lips as he watched the pachirisu. She caught his eye and a look of bewilderment crossed her eyes.

"What?" she asked.

Macro shook himself and his mind went to the laser in his pouch.

He scanned his paw to open the door. "Come with me."

She followed him up the small neon ladder. Macro caught a raised eyebrow off Anchor as the door hissed shut again behind them.

"You said you wanted to work for me," said Macro. "Well I got you a laser."

"Really? That was quick!"

"I got lucky really." He stopped by his room and paused to look over his shoulder before opening the door. "But it's no use unless you have a belt."

He threw the door open and strutted over to his night stand. Fortunately he had two spare belts just in case. DL wasn't much smaller than him, so one of his belts should fit. He pulled one out and checked it over before turning back to her. She was waiting in the doorway, casting her eyes over his sparsely decorated room.

"You could have come in," he said.

"You don't allow girls in here."

He shrugged and strolled over to her. "Fair point. But it's not like I was sleeping." He handed her the belt and took a step back. "That should fit."

She looped the belt around her slender waist and clipped the buckle together. It slipped at an angle over her left hip and she jigged it about to no avail.

"Hmm…" she said.

"We can always get it altered." He reached into his pouch and pulled out the laser, flicking open the back to check the contents. "This has water, grass and electric. But… Since you are an electric type, I doubt you'll need the electric one."

He slid the yellow cylinder out and handed her the gun. She turned it around in her paws then popped it into the holster on her right. It tugged the belt down towards her right hip and she chuckled.

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to get it altered." She fixed him with a beaming smile. "Thank you."

He cleared his throat and placed a paw on her shoulder to steer her out of the doorway, letting the door close behind him.

"Let's get some lunch," he said. "I'm starving."

…

Surge was growing increasingly agitated. The signal she'd been using to follow Wildcard Gamma had been cut off, leaving her at a huge disadvantage in her pursuing of the ship. It had ended at Pulse City, and thankfully the giant wishiwashi was still parked in the docks.

A huge granbull moved away from it, dusting his paws down and smoothing out his purple mowhawk. One of Macro's crew, she guessed. If he wasn't boarding the ship then that meant it was going

to be parked up for a fair bit longer. She'd just have to wait, and hope she never lost track of it.

With a deep sigh, she leant back in her seat and ran her paws over her face. Twice she could have killed Macro, and twice she'd failed. What on earth was wrong with her? She'd had crushes before, but they'd never interfered with her work.

She spread her claws and peered through them at Pulse City's neon streets. Maybe it was because she knew what that 'living computer' actually was. She knew that Download Database was in safe paws.

No… that wasn't it. Macro kept interfering in government business. He had to be stopped before he went too far. But how far was too far? Had it already surpassed that? Whatever those government fleets were doing at that dimensional gate was disrupted. Whatever they had pulled through was stolen. But were they going too far?

She let out a loud groan and sank even further into her seat. "I can't be doing with this!"

She unbuckled her seatbelt and slipped from the leather chair towards the hatch. A good drink might sort her head out. She just deeply hoped she didn't run into Macro in the bar. Maybe it would be best to find a different, more low key pub.

Her eyes fell on Wildcard Gamma and her mouth turned dry. Another deep sigh escaped her lungs. Of course, she'd lost the tracking signal.

Nope, that ruled that out. She needed to keep him in her sights.

…

Please R&R

Chapter 20

Chapter Twenty

Moonlight Lounge was still heaving with pokemon of wildly varying sizes. Macro and DL slipped unnoticed between the feet of a rhydon and ducked through the crowd towards the far end. A wide sofa sat at the edge of a stained carpet. The familiar illumise that often accompanied Matrix wherever he showed up in the Lounge was stood right beside the sofa. The ribombee wasn't wearing the virtual reality helmet this time, however. Instead he was cheering on his companion, Switch, who was acting like he'd never worn a VR set before in his life.

Macro stopped behind the sofa and leant across it. "First timer?"

Switch flapped his wings and shouted something at the holoscreen, oblivious to the mawile's presence. Matrix looked over his shoulder and gave Macro a small smile.

"I'm guessing so," he said. "But… he's doing a better job than I am."

The ribombee turned back to the screen and wound his antennae in his paw. A swift wing beat from Switch sent the virtual head of a tyranitar rolling away down a metallic mountainside.

"Pokemon play stuff like this?" DL asked.

"Yeh," said Macro. "Pretty popular with the younger generation."

"Huh." She ran a paw over her right ear. "It doesn't appeal to me at all."

"Take her away, Macro," said Matrix. "She's killing my buzz."

DL chuckled and Macro pushed himself back from the sofa.

"We're actually gonna get some lunch," he said. "Wondered if you were ready to join us?"

Switch raised his talons to his head and wrenched the helmet free. He shook out his feathers and turned his head to look at Macro.

"Lunch?" he asked. "I could eat."

"That got your attention did it?" Macro tutted.

Switch shook his head again to smooth the last straggling feathers out and hopped from the chair with a little flutter, an unusually beguiling gesture for a large raptor.

The dull drone from Matrix's wings cut through the mishmash of voices as the group made their way over to a table tucked away in a quiet corner of the lounge. Only two other pokemon occupied the corner. A pair of rattata, one of which had fallen asleep, sprawled across their table with his glass clasped in one paw.

Macro climbed onto the seat at the free table, trying his best not to look the other rattata in the eye. A look of greed had crossed his face and he eyed Switch cautiously while keeping one eye on the mawile. He swigged the last of his drink before clambering down and strutting over to the bar.

DL scooped up the tattered and slightly damp menu and shook it open. "What do you recommend?"

Macro shrugged. "I don't know about you, but I'm having my usual. Occa and nutpea burger and fries."

Switch leant over her shoulder and the bridge of his beak creased. "Quite a varied menu."

"It isn't bad," said Macro.

"Oh, I'm not impressed," said Switch. He raised a claw and jabbed it into the damp card. "What's this? Flambe seaking fillet?"

Macro let out a long 'oh' and leant across DL so he could speak quietly. "I guess they didn't eat meat in your time then?"

"No they did not!" Switch's eyes opened impossibly wide and he turned them back onto the menu. A look of realisation crossed his young face. "You mean… this is actually meat from a pokemon? That's disgusting!"

Macro threw himself across DL who let out a squeak of surprise, and clasped his paws over the talonflame's beak.

"Keep your voice down!" he hissed.

He looked back over at the opposite table. The dozing rattata had woken up and rubbed a paw over his groggy eyes. He fixed them on Macro's table and let out a dry chuckle.

"Hey, how 'bout that? Hunter's gone and got 'imself a hostage." He looked over at the empty spot beside him and his grin fell. "Hey… where'd my brother go?"

The rattata slipped from his seat, sloshing what was left of his drink down his chest, and staggered away from the table. He searched the crowd briefly before it swallowed him up and drowned out his near-incomprehensible shouts.

Macro released Switch's beak and the talonflame brushed his wing feathers over it.

"So this is normal?" Switch asked. "You pokemon eat each other now?"

"Are you telling me humans never ate meat?" Macro asked quietly. "Because the fairy tales I've read tell me otherwise."

Switch's beak hung open slightly as his eyes narrowed into slits almost as dangerous as the glinting end of his beak. Macro shuffled in his seat and retrieved the menu from DL.

"Does my reaction look like I eat meat to you?" he spat.

"I guess not," said Macro. "So those stories were wrong then?"

"Not exactly," said Switch. "But some humans are vegan."

"The same could be said for this world, too," Macro explained. "And not a member of my crew would touch so much as an egg."

"But this is wrong," said Switch. "Do you see no issue with this? You're the same species! It's cannibalism!"

"Of course I see an issue with it! But unfortunately the current mayor doesn't. You wanna do something about it, then take it up with her."

"I think I will! I'm surprised no one else has already!"

"They have." Macro turned his violet eyes onto Switch. "They all died."

Switch's beak snapped shut and he stared back at Macro. Then he sighed and sank slightly in his seat.

"What's happened to this world?" he asked.

"How much time have you got?" Macro folded the menu and placed it back on the table. "'Cos explaining it's gonna take a while."

DL fixed Switch with a pitiful gaze. "I'm still learning myself."

Switch sighed and ruffled his feathers. "I don't think I want to eat here."

"Believe me, you want a vegan diet then you're gonna have a hard time finding anywhere," said Macro. "Best place I can suggest is Luma City, but it'll take about a day to fly there in my ship and I'm hungry now." He paused then added, "Although Cookie might appreciate some company if you wanna go back to my ship."

"I don't know…" Switch looked around at the bar and shuddered. "I want to go back home."

"Well, that ain't happening any time soon is it?" Macro shoved the menu at him. "You have three choices. You choose something off here that doesn't have meat in it, you go back to my ship and eat cake - although I'm not promising there'll be any left, Cookie has a huge appetite - or you starve. You pick."

Switch eyed the menu as though he was suspecting poison then took it in his left talons. DL took it back off him and gave him a warm smile as she spread it open on the table for them both to view it. Whatever they said to one another didn't reach Macro's ears, drowned out by the drone of voices.

Macro leant back in his seat and rubbed at his temples.

"Culture shock."

He turned to face Matrix, but he was watching DL and Switch while winding his antennae around his paw.

"That's what it is," he said. "He'll get over it, just like we all have."

Macro tutted and folded his arms. Get over it… he wouldn't have worded it quite like that.

He took the opportunity to fire all their orders over the bar as a brief breath of fresh air. After all their meals were delivered, they sat around the table tucking into them in a complete, awkward silence. It made his occa and nutpea burger taste oddly bitter, although that was also likely the work of some jealous chef yearning for forty thousand credits.

Anchor flopped down into the seat opposite them, clutching a plate in one paw and half a toastie in the other. The smell of grilled root vegetables and sour sauce made Macro's nose crinkle. The granbull took a bite out of his meal and looked at each of them in turn.

"Wow. Somethin' happen while I was away?" he asked.

Macro looked up from his burger and wiped the back of his paw across his mouth.

"You took a while," he said. "I thought you were right behind us?"

"I took the chance to have a shower," he said. "Was greasy under that panel."

"Is something wrong with your ship?" Switch asked.

"Loose wire," said Anchor. "Also discovered one of the turrets has taken some damage. Just exterior stuff," he quickly added before Macro almost fell off his seat. "Both will take a jiffy to fix, but it'll have to wait until later. My head's still feeling fuzzy."

"At this rate, we might not leave until morning," said Macro. "Can no one else fix it?"

"You trust anyone else to repair your ship?" Anchor snorted.

Macro hugged his arms across his chest and diverted his gaze to the red wall. No… no, he did not.

DL shifted beside him and raised her arms as she stretched languidly.

"That was good," she said.

Macro spun his head around and his eyes flew wide open when he spotted her empty plate. "Did you inhale that?!"

Anchor laughed and struck the table repeatedly with a broad paw. "Gotta appreciate a girl who likes her food, eh Cap'n?"

"I think I'd like something sweet," she said. "I'm feeling rather tired."

"You could take a nap?" Matrix suggested.

She shook her head. "It's much too early for that."

"Best time," said Anchor. "You nap later in the day, then you won't sleep well tonight."

"The doctor told me it's normal," she said. "I'm still getting the anesthesia out of my system, and I don't really want to sleep the day away. I've not spent that long with my memories yet."

Macro tapped his claws on the table and spoke cautiously. "By memories, you mean…"

"I really want some cheri ice cream," she said.

Macro sighed and waved a paw. "All right. I'll take you for ice cream. Switch, shuffle out."

The talonflame scooted along the leather seats and plopped onto the floor, allowing DL and Macro to clamber out.

"But you've not finished your burger," Anchor said with some surprise.

"I've lost my appetite," said Macro. "And I'm fairly certain someone's soaked it with jaboca berry juice."

"Ooh!" Anchor's eyes widened and he dragged Macro's plate towards himself.

"I'll meet you back here in a bit," said Macro. "Since we're gonna be stuck here a while, we might as well watch a movie or something."

"I'm on it!" Matrix pulled out his pocket computer.

Macro grabbed DL's elbow and steered her through the crowd towards the door, blatantly ignoring the sneers thrown his way. Fortunately there was no sign of the magmar he'd conned the laser out of. Good. He really wasn't in the mood to be dealing with any conflict.

"So where are we going?" DL asked as they stepped outside.

"Totally Rad Ice," he said. "It's not as awesome as it sounds."

"Hmm. But they do cheri ice cream, right? How many parlors are there?"

"Three. But this one is affordable and probably the only place that won't mess up my order."

"So they're friends?"

"Not exactly." He shrugged. "But I did introduce them to Cookie."

"Oh!" DL chuckled. "Then I imagine he buys a lot from them."

"Sometimes. He's a good chef. He taught them about flavor combinations and their sales exploded." He folded his arms and smirked. "They paid well, too."

She crinkled her nose in confusion. "I thought you said it wasn't as awesome as it sounds?"

"It isn't," he said. "It's just a dockside ice cream stand. Not your luxury, five-star ice cream parlor with sundaes and crepes."

The small ice cream stand stood beside Dockside Dogs, the blue and white awning stretching out to provide shelter from the sun. Although it wasn't exactly a sunny day. Only one other customer stood before the shop, waiting patiently for his ice cream. Beside the shop stood a statue of a vanilluxe, a common occurrence at ice cream parlors. Vanilluxe's pointed body and slushy head was said to have inspired the use of cones to serve ice cream.

A young cubchoo peered down at Macro and beamed widely.

"Macro!" he said. "Great to see you. What can we get you?"

Macro nudged DL forward. She stared up at the menu and pointed a delicate claw.

"Cheri and chocolate please?" she said.

The cubchoo nodded energetically, the long dangle from his nose swinging harmlessly. He shouted to his companion, a snorunt, who eagerly got to work.

"Nothing for you?" the cubchoo asked Macro.

The mawile folded his arms and stared at the long menu. It couldn't hurt.

"Mago and razz berry," he said.

The cubchoo called out his order then stretched his paw down to take his credits. Macro held out a credits bill which the cubchoo snatched up with a small cheer.

"Made my day," he said. "It's been awful quiet."

The snorunt appeared with their ice creams and the pair took them and turned towards the docks. DL gave the two ice pokemon a cheerful wave and trotted to Macro's side.

"You really need to remember your p's and q's," she said.

"Sorry?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Please and thank you," she said. "I don't think I've ever heard you say either."

He shrugged. "I don't ever think about it."

He leant on the rail, staring out at the mass of blue dotted here and there with themed ships. One shaped like a gorebyss turned to pull into the docks whereas several were moving away.

"You should be more aware of it," she said. "You come across as rude and you're only going to make more enemies with that attitude."

He waved a paw at her. "Pish posh. It's not like I haven't got loads already."

"Well, it's never too late to correct your attitude." She leant beside him and lapped up a trail of cherry before it dripped over the end of her cone. "This is good. You sold them short."

He chuckled and licked at his own ice cream. "You clearly haven't had one of Moonlight Lounge's sundaes."

She smiled and leisurely tucked into her snack. Macro turned back to the ocean of marine-themed ships drifting through the calm sky. For a rare moment, he actually felt peaceful. No one would have assumed a single one of those ships was at odds with another. In most instances, it wasn't the case. Pulse City might have been classed as a dangerous place, but at least a majority of the space pirates actually got along in spite of type differences. Although very few tended to mingle in their ships. Most ships carried a mono-typed crew much like his own.

"You know, they said they couldn't remove this."

DL's voice snatched him out of his reverie. She pawed at the antennae behind her right ear while her other paw held what was left of her cone. The smile on her face had vanished and she let her arm flop back onto the rail.

"You… asked them to remove it?" he asked.

"Not immediately. It seems to be the only way I can get my memories back. But… I don't want it forever."

"No, I can understand that." He watched a trickle of mago ice cream drip onto his black paw.

"It's rooted into my brain," she said. "They told me if they remove it then it could do some serious damage."

He shrugged. "Then I guess you're stuck with it, unfortunately."

"But I don't want to be stuck with it," she said. "It's distorting and hideous."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"But it is! It's horrible, and it makes me look hideous."

"You're not hideous, DL."

She fell silent and he could feel her chocolate eyes burning into the side of his head. He waved a paw and sighed.

"Besides," he said. "A lot of pokemon have modifications like that. Some even do it to give themselves a more realistic experience playing games. You're not exactly out of place."

She sighed. "It's just so alien."

"I don't know." He let his arm flop over the edge of the rail and his ice cream fell free and flopped down into the glass dome. "Drat. Anyway… think of the positives."

"What positives?" She laughed bitterly. "You can turn me off at the flick of a switch."

"Well… I'm not saying that's positive. But you have access to a computer in your head. Not many can claim that without plugging themselves in first."

"How is that positive?"

"You have access to some kind of encyclopedia, right?" said Macro. "That could be pretty useful at say a quiz."

"That's cheating."

"If it's in your head, it's knowledge as far as I'm concerned."

She laughed again and stuck the last of her cone in her mouth. "Thanks for the ice cream."

He shrugged. "Don't mention it."

Silence fell over them again and he stared back out at System Sky. Memories… if it weren't for Socket, DL wouldn't be having to go through this. Nothing he could say would take that wretched technology out of her head.

She stiffened beside him and he snapped his head around to look at her. The antennae began to flash orange and green and her large eyes turned distant.

"Retrieving information from TimeSkip."

Her body went limp and he leapt across to catch her before she struck the floor.

"Information received. Location - System. One thousand and seven years ago. Relaying co-ordinates."

He crouched onto the floor, letting DL lie against him as he pulled out his pocket computer. His memory was nowhere near as good as Matrix's, but he tried his best to punch in the co-ordinates. As the map on his screen pinpointed the location, his heart sank. Meta City? That was where Socket was located. If he'd got it right, the time pocket was right inside Central Meta Hospital. There was no way he could beat her from where he stood. His arms flopped to his side and he looked down at the disoriented pachirisu. She ran a paw over her eyes and pushed herself away from him as she stared out at the vast blue sky. He followed her gaze and swallowed dryly. He'd have to let Socket have this one.

…

BackDoor chuckled as he floated before the swirling black and ultraviolet hole just outside its gravitational pull. The excitement was too much. Beyond that time pocket there could be hundreds of humans. One of them should surely satisfy Socket's desires. As for the others… well, she could make a whole army of living computers.

The smile fell from his face and he turned a glare onto TimeSkip.

"What's taking so long?!" he screeched.

The emotionless android didn't even look at him. He wasn't even sure it was looking at the time pocket. Probably just existing like empty androids did.

He folded his arms and pouted. They'd already been waiting an eternity for the hospital ward to vacate. Whatever the room was, it was empty save for a bed. The walls were peeling, too. Crammed with shelves filled with various medical equipment. One would think they'd take better care of a storage room. He had no sense of smell to speak of, but he could imagine one who did would be assaulted with various chemicals and cleaning fluids.

A female scream reached his ears, followed by incoherent shouting from deep beyond the swirling mass. He clapped his paws together eagerly and drifted away from it. The swirling mist distorted and filled with a gangly shape. Whatever it was, it shifted back and forth between gangly and winged, growing ever larger the closer it got to their world. His eyes narrowed in confusion. That hadn't happened before. Usually things stayed the same shape. Had they made some kind of critical error?

With a loud yell, the form solidified and flew from the hole, landing sprawled on the pristine white floor. Gangly, winged, gangly. Then it looked up at him. Long black fur surrounded a naked face. Two green eyes locked onto him with a look that made him burst into sporadic laughter.

"What are you laughin' at?!" she shrieked.

The hoopa's mouth snapped shut and twisted into a smirk. "Looks like we found a human. Wahay! High five!" He span to face TimeSkip and raised a paw.

The celebi merely stared at him through lifeless black eyes. BackDoor frowned and turned back to the human.

"Spoil sport," he said. "Ruin all my fun."

The human's form melted down into the winged form of a prehistoric archeops. Sharp teeth sneered at him and she twisted her reptilian head around to look at the swirling mass. It blinked out with a strange sucking sound and her jaw dropped.

"Sorry." BackDoor shrugged. "Guess you're stuck with us."

She looked back at him, breathing heavily. Her form changed back into that of a lanky human girl but her posture was every bit as primal as the previous pokemon form she'd sported.

"Stuck with you?" she gasped. "Where am I?!"

"System," he said. "Only one thousand and seven years later."

Her jaw dropped again and he laughed.

"You mean…" She sat up and flopped onto a feathered bottom, raising a claw to her jaw as if she wasn't even aware her form had changed. "You mean I time traveled?"

"You could say that."

"So… I'm a time traveler?" She looked down at her feathered body and made a thoughtful noise. "Always thought I was an archeops. Maybe they got it wrong, huh?"

Her eyes grew distant and she kept saying the words 'time travel' and 'archeops' over and over until the words began to blend together. At one point he was fairly certain she'd said 'time archeops'.

BackDoor blinked his eyes in confusion. What on earth had they got hold of? He exchanged glances with TimeSkip and shrugged.

"Oh well," he said. "I'm afraid you're coming with me. I ain't waiting for another human, you'll have to do."

She looked up with a start as he span in circles around her, fastening her interchanging limbs in place with gold strands. She let out a yelp of surprise as she was tugged into the air.

"What are you doing with me?!" she screamed. "Put me down! This instant! Wait…" She paused. "What day is it?"

"Come on, quick!" he snapped at the celebi. "Before someone sees us!"

They zipped from the small window, too small for their charge who's head bounced off the window frame. His laughter drowned out her screams and protests and he even did a small somersault in the sky, waving her around like a ball and chain.

"I think you'll quite like your new home," he told her. "Socket's got big plans for you!"

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Please R&R!

Chapter 21

A/N - Thanks for all new follows and faves! =D

Chapter Twenty One

"So this Socket has opened another time pocket?" Switch asked. "Much like the one I came through?"

"I'd say it's exactly like it," said Macro.

Wildcard Gamma and their two clients sat huddled in one of Moonlight Lounge's entertainment rooms. Eleven rooms occupied one floor, each one with its own screen that allowed the space pirates to choose between a selection of movies and video games. Even karaoke. Macro sat with his feet up on the table and his paws tucked behind his head, staring at their current sci-fi drama movie more so than actually watching it. He wasn't even sure any of them were actually watching it.

Switch shuffled in his seat and ruffled his feathers. "I'm not sure how to take this."

"None of us are," said Macro. "Until yesterday I didn't even believe humans actually existed."

"And now there might be an army of them," said Anchor.

"That's highly probable," said Switch. "Central Meta Hospital was filled with humans in comas. One thousand years on, you might have a cure for that now."

"A quick search of my records," said DL, "tells me the hospital was also home for victims of a fatal virus."

Switch shrugged. "I wouldn't worry about that. That might have been a huge issue back then, but the entity responsible for it doesn't exist

in your time line. They'd likely just be cured as soon as they passed through the time pocket."

"That's good," said Macro. "We don't have to worry about an epidemic."

Switch said nothing as he huddled further down into his seat. All eyes were on the movie but Macro wasn't sure any of them were really watching it.

No, he wasn't going to worry about an epidemic. Socket wanted humans, and if she'd managed to successfully drag any through then her rabid search across time and space might finally come to an end. Of course, there was always the possibility her search could go the other way, literally. If she sent something or someone back to the Fracture's time-line, she could change history. Make it so humans were more readily available.

A cold shudder ran down his spine and he hugged himself, trying to focus his paranoid mind on the movie and not on his swirling thoughts. There was no way she'd want to re-write history. How would that benefit her? No… she had other plans. She wanted to do something with the humans. He wanted to find out what and put an end to it.

"How many humans do you think she could have taken from that time line?" Anchor asked.

Switch shrugged and let out a sigh. "I've no idea. It could be one, it could be hundreds. All I know is the hospital was struggling to find room. It sparked a lot of hate between humans and pokemon, and was seen as an invasion more than an accident."

"That's not exactly fair!" Anchor scoffed.

Switch chuckled dryly and shook his head. "You might have been singing a different song if you lived back then."

The granbull huffed and folded his arms. "Little judgmental there, Switch."

"Believe me, I met a lot of perfectly nice pokemon who were wary of humans. I'm sorry if I sounded judgmental, I was going from experience."

Anchor shrugged. "Forget about it. Maybe you're right."

"I guess it's easy to be wary," said Matrix, who'd been rather silent since they entered the room. "I was wary of DL at first. Something alien can be unsettling."

"Yeh, and you fainted when Switch transformed." Macro chuckled.

"Hey!" The ribombee frowned. "I'm surprised no one else did!"

"You went rather pale yourself," said Anchor.

Macro felt his face heat up and he looked away from the granbull, catching a nod off DL. He grit his teeth and went back to the movie. He'd completely lost track of what it was about.

"I'm beginning to think," said Switch, "that something huge is going on here. I don't know enough about this world, but I do know that Socket needs to be stopped."

"That ain't gonna be easy," said Macro. "It would take an army, and hers is pretty big. She's got electric pokemon backing her somehow. I'm wondering if that's how she got her paws on DL."

The pachirisu stiffened at her name and fixed her chocolate eyes on him. "You think I worked for her?"

"No idea. But I'm sure we'll find out when you get more of your memories back." Macro turned back to Switch. "Nevertheless, if you're not prepared, you're gonna die. Simple. With a weapon ban throughout System, you're gonna stand no chance against her army."

"I shouldn't need a weapon," said Switch. "None of you should! You're pokemon, you're born with attacks. You learn them as you grow! Weapons are unnatural! Don't you think that's what she's trying to teach you with this ban?"

Anchor roared with laughter and struck his paw on his knee repeatedly. "Teach us?! She uses them herself! Her army's fleet are equipped with laser turrets!"

"And I've seen her goons firing lasers before now," said Macro. "Those who don't carry them don't work for her directly."

"Well, I don't plan to use a weapon," said Switch. "I can take care of myself just fine."

"Really?" Macro raised an eyebrow and leant back in his seat. "You're a flying type, right? Also fire type. That means your major weakness is rock. One stone edge and you're as good as dead."

The bridge of Switch's beak creased and his yellow eyes narrowed into slits. Macro met his leer head on and shrugged.

"I'm right, aren't I?" Macro asked. "I strongly recommend you equip yourself with some leaf blade talons. Scour the black market tomorrow and see what Worm can do for you. Failing that, someone else might sell them. Either way, I wouldn't go anywhere in System unprepared, especially if you're planning to fight back against Socket's army."

"Leaf blade talons?" Switch spat. "And what do you suggest I do about electric and water types?"

Macro ignored his heavy sarcasm and shrugged. "Use your imagination, eh?"

The door cracked open and a drowzee peered inside. He was oddly wobbly and almost spilled his drink over his waistcoat. The room fell into silence as the psychic tapir looked over them each in turn,

lingering on DL for a moment before turning his head to look at the movie.

"Androids Dreaming?" he asked in a heavily slurred, deep and dreary voice. It made him sound sleepy, and his words made Macro's fur stand on end. "Mind if I join you?"

"It's a free country," said Switch.

The space pirates fixed the talonflame with equal looks of surprise, but he didn't return them. He continued to stare at the screen, his beak held tightly shut.

"Cool." The drowzee stared at his glass and then looked over at the table. "I'm gonna get another beer. Save me a seat."

The door slammed shut after him, making Macro jump slightly. Burning anger rose in his chest and he rounded on the human.

"Free country?!" he spat. "You just invited another space pirate to join us?! Do you even know where you are?!"

"No," said Switch. "I don't. This isn't the System I know. This is some alien universe, and I think there's a lot you're not telling me."

"Really? I think we've told you a lot. What do you want to know, exactly?"

"Maybe you could start with what exactly is going on? Why is there a weapon ban? Why were you in exactly the right place at the right time to stop Socket obtaining me? Because the way I see it, after seeing this city and the way the pokemon act here, it's pretty obvious you're not the good guys." His eyes narrowed. "A weapon ban, in my opinion, is a good thing. Maybe the good guys are those in charge of this world, and you're just a bunch of anarchists."

Macro flashed his canines and rose to his feet, reaching for his laser.

"No!" DL's soft paw grabbed his wrist. "Stop it!"

His paw relaxed and he sighed, but his violet glare didn't leave the talonflame. "You've seen and heard what she's trying to do and you think she's the good guy? I told you! There are no good guys. You pick a side, and you fight for it." He paused and frowned. "Now which side is it gonna be? If I were you, I'd choose carefully."

Switch rolled his eyes and hopped from the seat. "I need some time to think."

Macro watched as he pulled the door open with his beak and strutted from the room. The door closed behind him with an ominous click, and the mawile fell back into his seat with a sigh. He rubbed the bridge of his nose and groaned.

"Making more enemies," said Anchor. "Well done, Cap'n."

"He started it," Macro hissed.

"I dunno. I'd say it's fairly even." Anchor picked up the remote and cranked the movie's volume up. "Let's just unwind for a bit, shall we?"

Macro leant his head back on the headrest and stared at the screen. Nonsense. It was just a load of nonsense.

DL shifted beside him and he turned his head to look at her.

"Were you really going to shoot him?" she asked, somewhat disappointed.

Macro shrugged and turned back to the movie. "Only if he struck out first. Like I said, you need to look out for number one. You don't, you die."

Anchor grunted with agreement. "Sadly that's the case."

…

"Knock knock!"

Socket looked up from her desk and stared aghast at her closed office door. That voice… what was BackDoor doing in her office? She didn't have much time to ask as the door flew open with a cry of 'Special delivery!' followed by a white-robed gangly mass. It struck the floor with a cry of protest and pushed itself up to leer at the floating hoopa android.

BackDoor burst into fits of giggles and struck TimeSkip on the back with a mitten-like paw. The onion-like pokemon lurched forwards under the impact, but its expressionless face didn't give away any sign of discomfort.

Socket turned her attention from the two androids to the creature sprawled on her floor. No longer a pile of limbs, it was instead covered with rugged yellow and blue feathers. Reptilian eyes fixed on Socket's and it pulled its lips back from a row of sharp teeth. Vicious, but she could rest assured it was tightly fastened in glowing chains.

"What is this?" she asked.

"A human," said BackDoor.

No sooner had he said it, the reptilian bird changed form to that of a lanky bald creature who's only visible fur congregated at the top of its head and fell down over its face and shoulders like an ebony waterfall.

"A human?" Socket stood up and moved around her desk to get a better look at the creature. It shifted once again into its feathered form. She rounded on BackDoor and hissed. "You flew over Meta City carrying this?! Did anyone see you?!"

BackDoor shrugged. "Don't know, don't care. Fact is you now have a human. We can finally get the ball rolling and move on with our plans!"

"They're my plans, BackDoor. You are merely a tool."

The hoopa shot over to her with such speed she took a step back. He waved his paw and a golden ring stretched out just behind the human. Black mist swirled inside it, lit up by ultraviolet light.

"If I shoved you through there, you'd die in seconds." BackDoor grinned and looked down at the spot between her and the human. "Oh. And there's another right beneath your feet."

A cold chill ran down Socket's back. She cleared her throat and looked back down at the human.

"I guess… this is suitable," she said.

The swirling mist disappeared to be replaced with her familiar office. BackDoor folded his arms and nodded.

"I should hope so," he said. "Took us long enough to find one of these things."

Tweak's jingling echoed over the room as he flopped towards them, stopping mere inches from the human's reptilian face.

"Looks like an archeops," he said. "Those things are extinct, right?"

Socket's heart plummeted towards her feet. Of course. She hadn't considered that. The strange pokemon form the human kept taking was prehistoric. Extinct. As out of place in System as the human species itself. She slapped a paw to her forehead and groaned.

"This won't do at all," she said. "It will stand out like a sore paw pad!"

The human roared and thrashed in an attempt to sit up. "I'll give you a sore paw pad if you don't get these wretched chains off me!"

Socket narrowed her eyes. "Don't you talk to me like that. I'm the mayor of System and while you're here you'll listen to and obey me. Understood?"

"Crystal."

Socket straightened her spine and stared down at the human. That didn't even make any sense.

"Anyway, tell me," Socket said slowly. "Why do you keep changing form? Is it some kind of self defense? Are you trying to break free?"

"Of course I'm trying to break free!" Her form switched again to the archeops. "As for this. Well… it's a sickness. I was in a hospital before that goof snatched me."

Tweak snorted laughter and looked up at BackDoor. "She called you a goof."

BackDoor's nose crinkled and he leered at the human. "Yeah. I'm not impressed. I might send it back."

"No!" Socket raised a paw and shook her head. "No, leave it. We'll keep the human. I can work something out. Tweak, fetch me Yobi. He might know something about this form changing issue."

"Roger!" Tweak raised a tiny paw in salute.

BackDoor watched the chingling flop from the room and turned back to the human. A wide smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth as she switched rapidly from her human form to the archeops and back.

"You think… you can fix this?" she gasped. "'Cos I really hope so. This is exhausting."

"I can imagine," said Socket. "What is your name, human?"

"It's Annie." She pushed herself up as best she could until she was sat on her knees. The golden chains still surrounded her limbs, fastening her arms around her chest in a way that was reminiscent of a straight jacket. "So let me get this straight. You're gonna fix me… then send me home?"

"Home?" Socket scratched behind her left ear. "I'm not sending you anywhere. You're going to work for me in return for…" She waved a

paw at her, "repairing this."

Annie switched back to her archeops form and fell sideways. Her long tail thrashed the floor as she flailed in a blind rage.

"For goodness sake, BackDoor!" Socket snapped. "Release her!"

BackDoor mumbled under his breath as he snatched the chains away. They vanished under his touch, melting away from Annie like butter.

"Ruin all my fun," he scoffed.

Annie pushed herself up and checked over her feathers, which vanished to be replaced by the long sleeves of her white robe. She looked up at Socket and BackDoor and gave a curt nod.

"Thanks," she said. "Been a long time since I was in confines like that. Didn't care for it at all."

"Well you're out of them now," said Socket. Her eyes flicked to the door as it creaked open. "Ah, Yobi. Come see what we've found."

"Tweak told me it's a human?" The sparksurfer raichu joined her side and his mouth fell open when he spotted Annie. "That… that's a human? Looks like an archeops to me."

"Give it time," said Socket.

The feathered form flickered like a bad connection, revealing the gangly limbs of the robed human, before settling on the archeops once more. Yobi stuttered and Socket looked down at him.

"Can you fix this?" she asked.

His yellow cheeks had turned pale, and he scratched at one of them anxiously. "I don't know. It sorta reminds me of that issue some ditto have."

"I was thinking the same thing," said Socket. "Impostor ditto aren't always in control of their ability."

"There's only one problem." Yobi's voice ended in a squeak as Annie's human form took over. "Ditto are rare, so that means their help is rare. Since they can't breed, they're… well, they mitosis and even then, that's an odd occurrence. Their bodies are completely different to ours, even prehistoric ones. So there's no saying the stuff that helps them will help… well, her." He nodded at Annie.

"We could at least give it a shot," said Socket. "Get me the medication and we'll try it."

"It might take me a while," said Yobi.

"Then get it before morning."

Yobi pursed his lips and backed towards the door, not taking his eyes off the shape-shifting human. As he reached the door, he turned and hopped onto his tail, zipping down the corridor out of sight.

Tweak whined and looked up at Socket. "Wish I could do that."

"Now." Socket looked back down at Annie. "About you. I think it's best if we get you a private room somewhere. We can't exactly book you into a hospital since there are no humans in System."

"None?" Her eyes widened. "I thought System were full of them. Did they lie?"

"That was back in your time line," said Socket. "Here, there are no humans.

"Huh." The archeops scratched her head with a wing claw. "Interesting."

Her eyes drifted to the open door and she muttered the word 'interesting' over and over in the following silence. Socket shifted

from one foot to the other and followed the human's gaze to the door.

"Well," she said. "Fortunately I have a spare room in this building that you can borrow for the time being. Come with me."

She strolled towards the door and ducked as BackDoor and TimeSkip took off over her head. She rounded on the two androids and scowled.

"You two need to get back to work!" she barked.

"Not a chance!" BackDoor waved a dismissive paw. "I wanna see how this unfolds."

Socket tutted and shoved past the two androids. Realizing Annie wasn't following her, she looked back to find the human still kneeling on the floor while winding a lock of black hair in one finger, her white robe spread out around her like a pool of snow.

"Annie!" Socket snapped.

She looked up with a start and blinked her green eyes.

"Come on. Do you want help or not?" Socket turned and marched from the room.

…

It was oddly dark when Macro opened his eyes. The movie room was almost empty. Only Matrix and DL accompanied him, and Switch hadn't come back since he'd stormed off. None of them had any idea what had become of the talonflame. There was also no sign of the drowzee. He'd been oddly silent during the film, innocently sipping at his seemingly endless supply of beer while casting the occasional glance in Macro and DL's direction. Not wanting to draw attention to himself, Macro had stayed put, relying on the safety of his crew. There was no chance of Anchor letting the drowzee

anywhere near him, and either the tapir had known that or he'd simply just wanted to watch the film. Nevertheless, he was now gone, leaving the three sleepy pirates alone with the movie's ending credits.

Matrix stretched and yawned so wide his jaw clicked. "Well, if you're now up, I think I'm gonna head to bed."

"I think I might follow you." Macro rubbed his eyes. "I can't believe I fell asleep with that drowzee here."

"Yeh." Matrix looked around the room with a start. "We think he influenced it."

Macro's eyes flew wide open and he looked down to check his weapons and pouch. Everything in place, and as for his pouch, DL was using it as a pillow. Her long, thick tail curled up to her chest and her right paw wound into his long leg-fur. His own paw hovered above her uncertainly as he tried to work out how exactly to deal with the situation.

"I doubt he's done anything," said Matrix. "Anchor and I had a good look around and everything's still here. Drowzee just… have that affect on others."

"Huh?" Macro looked around at him then nodded. "Yeh, sure."

"I mean, they eat dreams." Matrix buzzed sleepily into the air and yawned again. "He might have just been hungry."

"Anchor might know what went on." Macro turned back to DL and let out a sigh between his teeth. "I need to wake her up somehow. I'll meet you back at the ship."

Matrix buzzed over to the door then paused to look over his shoulder. "Take care, all right? I don't know where that drowzee went."

Macro waved a paw at him before he slipped through the door to leave him alone with the sleeping pachirisu.

To the untrained eye, she looked just like any other pachirisu. White and blue fur, thick curly tail. No one would have suspected she had any modifications from his angle. The antennae was hidden completely behind her right ear, and the jack socket was so small it was barely noticeable until she turned her back.

Her nose twitched and she curled up smaller, burying her face into her tail and tightening her paw around his fur. Part of him really wanted to dislodge her, jump up and make a bee-line for the door. The other part, however, was transfixed by the low, blue light reflecting off her glossy fur. Every small curve of her body seemed to be highlighted by it. It was little wonder the drowzee kept looking in their direction. Any sensible male would be attracted to such a beautiful creature.

That was it, wasn't it? The drowzee had been after something the entire time. Deep, burning anger rose in his chest and his paw fall onto her shoulder almost of its own accord. He jumped, snatching back his offending paw. The motion snapped her awake and she released his fur to brush her own out of her face. He leapt to his feet and glanced over at the door, trying to mask his sudden embarrassment and anger behind a mask of nonchalance.

"What happened?" she asked. "Where's everyone gone?"

"Bed," he said. "The movie's over. We're going back to the ship."

She pushed herself up while she yawned and stretched. "All right. Just give me a minute."

"Now, DL," he hissed.

She fixed her chocolate eyes on his and he diverted his gaze to the holoscreen. It was still on. A quick flick of the remote sorted that out.

"What's the problem?" she asked.

"The problem is, like I've said before, space pirates aren't nice pokemon. Now get back to the ship."

She slipped from the chair, muttering under her breath as she left the room. He held the door open, watching as she vanished into the ladies rest room. She couldn't wait until they got back? It was like she was just trying to wind him up.

A shadow fell on the wall as someone rounded the corner, and he looked up into the confused face of the drowzee. The wobbly pirate was clutching yet another glass of beer, but in his other paw was what looked like a blue cocktail, complete with tiny umbrella. He looked past Macro into the movie room and his long face fell.

"Hey," he said in that deep, dreary voice. "Where'd the pretty pachirisu go?"

Every hair on the back of Macro's neck stood on end and he flashed his canines, watching as the drowzee slipped into the room for a good look around. He let the door slam shut behind him, separating him from the drowzee, more so for the tapir's sake than his own.

No. Space pirates were not nice pokemon.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 22

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Twenty Two

Blue paint sloshed over the hull of Wildcard Gamma, filling in the unsightly metallic grey scuff that marred the poor ship. Macro hung from the fin by a thick rope, and while clutching the other end of it tightly in his paw, the other paw worked away running the roller over the ship's side. It would take a while to dry before he could repair the name. Part of him wanted to ask Matrix to do that, since he could fly. But he wasn't entirely sure he could trust the ribombee's artistic skills to perfectly match the chosen font.

He loosened his paw enough to lower himself, careful to not burn his pads on the rope's rough surface. Using his feet, he dragged himself along the ship's hull to reach the farthest end of the scuff. Another quick flick of the roller and it was soon filled in.

"All right there, Macro?"

He froze and turned his head to look down at the speaker. Switch stood on the docks, stretching his neck out to his full height to look up at him. A small smile played at his beak, and beside him sat a paper bag.

"Huh." Macro turned back to his work. "Didn't think I'd be seeing you again."

"Yeh, I wanted to apologize," said Switch. "I said some horrible things. Do you have stripes on your back?"

The surprise in the human's voice almost made Macro drop his paint roller. He'd almost forgotten he'd removed his scarf to avoid getting it covered in paint. He cast Switch a glance back and scooted

backwards to neaten up an area the rope had unfortunately smudged.

"It's a birth mark," he said. "I've had it since I hatched. My mum had the same exact thing. I don't care about it."

"Huh… A friend of mine has the same markings," said Switch. "Only his are dark blue. He's a meowstic. His mate is a mawile. I wonder if you're related?"

"I don't really care," said Macro.

"Really? Because they're great friends of mine," said Switch. "They just had a kid of their own before I got sucked in here. They made me an uncle. If you are related, then that would make them you're… I dunno… Great Times Fifty grandparents, and me your Great Times Fifty uncle."

Macro raised an eyebrow. "Great Times Fifty?"

"Hey, I'm trying to apologize here," said Switch.

Macro snorted and absently painted over the already re-painted section. "You're no uncle of mine, Switch."

"Come on, Macro! I need your help. I don't have a clue where I am," said Switch. "You say it's System, but to me, it's not. At least, it's not the System I know. One minute I'm in this world filled with green and forests with floating islands and hover boards. Sure, there are similarities but… from what I can gather, it's wildly different. Pokemon eat meat, there's a mayor, space pirates, ships… the closest thing to a ship where I came from was my friend's flying car! Nothing else flew except flying type pokemon and ancient drifting continents!"

"And that warranted accusing me of the bad guy?" Macro scoffed. "After I saved your hide n'all?"

"You told me there are no good guys," said Switch. "And from the information I picked up last night, I'm inclined to agree. But it doesn't mean there can't be any."

"Everyone keeps to themselves," said Macro. "You should do that, too." He finished filling in the bare patch and turned to look down at him again. "What do you mean 'information'?"

"I chatted to some guys," said Switch. "Tried to find out what on earth is going on here. Turns out you have quite the price on your head."

"That's what I get for annoying Socket."

Macro tossed the paint roller towards the paint pallet, missing by a mile and leaving a nice blue smear on the docks. Using both paws, he shimmied his way down the rope. It was no easy task. His side kept bouncing off the hull as he swung back and forth.

Claws dug into his bare shoulders and he let out a yelp, releasing the rope to grab at his assailant's legs. With two beats of his wings, Switch was back on the ground. As soon as Macro's feet touched the docks, Switch released him and landed at his side.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to alarm you," said the talonflame. "But the way you were swinging, you would have got yourself covered in paint and ruined all your hard work." He winked, taking Macro quite by surprise. "By the way, here."

He reached into the paper bag with his beak and pulled out a wad of neatly folded fabric. Macro took it cautiously and looked it over. It was a black scarf, the ends of which were decorated with a checkered blue pattern. Towards the end of the design, the blue squares thinned out as though they were being dragged apart, losing control of gravity entirely to drift towards the middle of the scarf.

"I bought it as an apology," said Switch. "I just assumed you liked scarfs since you wear one all the time. This one has a bit more

colour. I thought it matched your lasers' blue trim."

Macro stared down at it for a moment before meeting Switch's golden eyes. "How did you buy it? I don't imagine you came here with a pocket full of credits."

"I joined some guys in poker last night," Switch explained. "One of them was rather generous and offered to lend me some so long as I gave him half of my winnings if I won. Not only did I get the information I wanted, I got lucky and won four thousand. That left me with two thousand after I'd honored my end of the deal."

"A generous space pirate?" Macro couldn't help but laugh. "I think he was using you as an extra paw at winning."

Switch shrugged. "Well it worked in both our favours."

"Colour isn't usually my thing." Macro kept his eyes on Switch's, but the talonflame merely smiled.

Macro sighed and turned back to the paint pallet. He tidied the roller away and gathered up his familiar all-black scarf, tossing it around his shoulders twice so the long length fell down both his front and back.

"You weren't wrong," said Switch. "Everyone here thinks very little of Socket."

"That opinion is pretty rampant on System Ground as well."

"From what I gather, most areas down there are toxic." Switch paused. "What happened?"

"Destruction," said Macro. "Pollution. You name it, it happened. There ain't a single tree left in System except for cultivated berry orchards, and even they're rather limited outdoors. The air near the cities just kills them."

"Why wasn't something done sooner?"

"I tell you what." Macro rounded on him and placed a paw on his hip. "You travel back six hundred years ago and ask the first mayor what exactly he was thinking. All right? Because all this followed him and his laws about pollution reduction. Dumped it in the outskirts of Meta City and things backfired ridiculously. My personal opinion was that it was all down to discrimination. He just didn't like poison types."

"And what about this law about meat?"

Macro tossed the paint pallet into his tool bag and dusted down his paws. He fixed Switch with a raised eyebrow.

"You didn't raise that during your little game did you?" he asked.

Switch shook his head. "Not while one of them was munching on a fillet, no."

"Well, that was down to the next mayor," Macro explained. "Allegedly there was a famine. Pollution reduced where berry orchards could grow, and there was a month long drought that killed off a lot of trees and bushes. Desperate for food, pokemon looked to the ocean. Seaweed and other plants didn't have much appeal, so they turned on the water dwellers. Since they spend all their life in the water, they weren't seen as helpful to the community. So they 'made them helpful'. Since then, the rule stayed."

Switch's beak was clasped so tightly shut Macro feared for a moment it might break. The talonflame let out a sigh and shook his head.

"It's ridiculous," he said.

"Like I said. You wanna put things right, you take it up with the mayor. I can personally guarantee you that you won't come out of it in one piece. Keep your head low and just get on with things until we can get you back to your time line."

Switch nodded and scooped up the tool bag before Macro could grab it.

"I can promise you something, though," said Switch. "When I do get back, I'll make sure everyone understands turning to the ocean is not an option."

Macro stared at him, dumbfounded. "You're going to try and change the future?"

Switch nodded again.

Macro burst out laughing and took the bag from Switch's beak. "That's a good one!"

He turned and clambered up the neon ladder towards the entrance hatch.

"I'm serious!" said Switch.

"So am I!"

…

It had been a rough night in the mansion. Socket's new 'guest' had complained throughout the most of it, expressing great distress at her constant form changing. The gothitelle had begun to wonder if she'd been putting it on. Nevertheless, she didn't want to lose the human, so she'd made Tweak her personal butler. All night, the chingling had been back and forth carrying trays of water and biscuits, supplying blankets, removing blankets, guiding Annie around the mansion whenever she'd wanted to use the facilities. At one point, he'd had to check the wardrobe for monsters. Either Annie was a fantastic actor, or she'd seriously believed something was in the wardrobe. Between that and her frequent muttering and word-vomit, Socket was beginning to wonder if the human was in complete control of her faculties.

It didn't matter. After her form had been stabilized, every essence that made up her individuality would be removed and destroyed, leaving Socket with an empty, prehistoric shell.

She really needed to work out how on earth she was going to hide an archeops, or pass it off as 'normal'. They'd not been seen in System for thousands of years. How had the pokemon reacted a thousand years ago when a human took on that form? Since it was a human, it likely didn't have the same impact as a living fossil being discovered on a remote island.

Socket stared down at the human as she lay asleep in the large bed. Black and white sheets bunched up around her legs, exposing her bare feet. One arm lay sprawled along the pillow, reaching out over the edge of the bed towards the night stand. The other arm lay over her chest. Loud snores flew from her wide-open mouth in a way that would put a tyranitar to shame. For a brief moment, Socket considered grabbing the other pillow to stifle the wretched noise. However, the desire was shattered as Annie's form changed, shrinking slightly and replacing the snores with a snarl as she turned over.

Plop; jingle; plop; jingle. Tweak wriggled through the ajar door, which opened wide after him as someone followed him into the room.

"Yobi's here!" he cheered.

Socket craned her neck around to look at the raichu. "About time. Did you get the medicine?"

Yobi ducked as BackDoor and TimeSkip darted in over his head, the hoopa letting out a squeal of glee.

"What are you doing here?" Socket asked him. "You two are supposed to be working."

"Hey, I ain't missing this." BackDoor folded his arms and nodded at the human. "I wanna see how this plays out."

Socket sighed and turned back to Yobi. "You really need to be more assertive over your creations." She gave a nod to the androids.

He raised a transparent blue, plastic jar and jiggled it. Its contents rattled around inside softly and he set it in Socket's waiting paw.

"She should try two a day at first," he said. "Ditto are a lot smaller, and one tablet probably won't do the job."

"Well, let's try it then." Socket leaned forward and poked the archeops in the shoulder. "Oi. Annie. Wake up."

Annie grumbled and tugged the duvet higher with her claws.

"Annie!"

Socket took hold of her shoulder and shook her rather abruptly. Annie's reptilian head spun round, her eyes flashing, and white teeth snapped at the gothitelle's paw. Socket snatched it away and took a step back, checking herself for any signs of injury. Fortunately, there were none. She ignored BackDoor's irritating laughter and fixed her blue eyes onto Annie's.

"That was uncalled for," she said.

"So was waking me." Annie's form changed right as she was brushing a paw over her head. A look of confusion crossed her face and she tugged at the black strands of disheveled hair. "I was having a good dream, too."

"Sorry to disturb you," Socket said, unemotionally. She shoved the jar at the human. "Take two of these. They're meant to keep your form steady."

"So this will fix me?" Her form changed once more as she unscrewed the lid.

Socket held her breath, watching the archeops swallow two tablets then reach for her glass. Her form snapped back to human again

and she necked the remaining tepid water. With a satisfied sigh, she released the glass to clatter back onto the night stand and looked down at herself.

"I feel different," she said.

"Different how?" Socket's eyes trailed over the human's gangly limbs and black hair, fearing the worst.

"Like… well, it's like when you get hiccups then suddenly they're gone."

Socket's nose crinkled and she pouted her bottom lip. It was an odd way of wording it. It was rather easy to forget you'd even had hiccups.

"Is this it?" she asked Yobi. "It's worked?"

"They work pretty quickly," he replied. "I'd say, going off what she's said, that her form has settled."

"So she's stuck like this?!" Socket spat. "What am I supposed to do, Yobi? Dress her in a onesie?!"

The raichu's mouth opened and closed as he struggled to find words. "Erm… Well… She does need to take them once a day to remain-"

"So we wait?"

Annie kicked her legs over the edge of the bed and stretched. A huge smile spread across her face and she picked up the jar of tablets.

"Can I keep these magic pills?" she asked.

"They're not magic," said Yobi. "They're medical. And yes. I have a repeat prescription, actually-"

Socket snatched it from his grip and eyed it over. "Fantastic. So I'll be sure to give them her once a day, and hope she stays in the form of a pokemon!"

"I dunno," said Annie. "I quite like this form. It's awkward running around with wings."

"Well you don't blend in at all," said Socket.

"Really?" BackDoor asked. "I think it's a lot more fun this way, personally."

Tweak looked up at Socket and blinked. "Shall I go find a onesie?"

Socket fixed him with a leer. "Tell me, Tweak. What do you think?"

"I'm thinking charizard or infernape. Back in a tick."

He turned and flopped from the room, his jingling bell fading away while Socket groaned inwardly.

"He has a point," said BackDoor. "She does have the figure to pull off an infernape."

Socket bit back the urge to threaten the hoopa with dismantling and turned back to Annie. The human examined each of her limbs as though seeing them for the first time. Her green eyes seemed to take up half of her face as she slowly turned her hand back and forth.

"It's so cool," she said. "It's not changing!"

Yobi let out a sigh of relief and flopped sideways into the wall. He wiped his brow with a paw and smiled, chuckling to himself.

"Are you okay, Yobi?" Socket asked. "You still appear to be sleep deprived."

He shrugged. "I'm fine. So… what's next? You want to bring her to my lab, or-"

"Lab?" Annie looked up with a start.

Socket's wide eyes narrowed on the raichu and she launched him backwards in a psychic bubble.

"Fool!" she snapped.

"Look." Annie slipped from the bed and adjusted her weight on either foot. "I appreciate the help n'all, but I'm kinda plannin' on leaving here now. So… if you don't mind."

She reached for the pill bottle, but Socket snatched it away. The gothitelle met Annie's raised eyebrow with the sweetest smile she could muster.

"These things work both ways, dear," she said. "I helped you, now if you wouldn't mind returning the favour and helping me-"

Annie raised her arm and in a flash brought it down against the gothitelle's jaw. Pain exploded through Socket's face. She flew sideways and hit the floor in a sprawl, sending the pill bottle into the air. Annie reached out and caught it in one hand, and quickly checked it over for any sign of damage. BackDoor let out a gleeful squeal then burst into fits of laughter that bounced off Socket as she tried to process what on earth had just happened.

"No thanks," said Annie. "I don't do paybacks."

She stepped over the stunned mayor and slipped though the door, not meeting the raichu's concerned eye.

Socket pushed herself up and shook her head sharply so her long ears bounced off her cheeks. Her jaw pulsed where the wretched human had struck her, and she rubbed at it trying to soothe it away. As realisation slowly washed over her, her fur began to bristle.

"That was awesome!" BackDoor roared. He wiped an imaginary tear from his eye and nudged the silent celebi. "Did you see that? Oh

my… I would have paid to see that!"

Socket turned her livid, icy stare on him. "Shut up, BackDoor! We have work to do."

"Oh great." His smile fell and he threw his paws into the air. "You're gonna make us look for another human, aren't you?"

"No. I want that one retrieving. She's going to pay for this." She pushed herself to her feet and turned towards the door. "Yobi, pull yourself together and retrieve her. The guards will have stopped her at the door, so she shouldn't get very far. BackDoor-" She turned on the hoopa. "Commence stage two of my plan."

His eyes lit up with glee and a huge grin spread across his face. "Stage two? About time!"

Before she could even begin to throw the finer details at him, he was out the window with TimeSkip in tow.

Socket turned back to the door where Yobi was still sprawled against the wall. She frowned and tapped her foot.

"Yobi?"

He fixed his bleary eyes on hers and cleared his throat. "Sorry, Madam Mayor. I think… I might be…"

He pushed himself to his feet and staggered from the room, almost tripping over his own tail.

She groaned and followed after him, tugging her pocket computer from her waist pouch. "Security! I need a strange creature apprehended. Do not be alarmed, but do not let down your guard either-"

"Sorry, Mayor." The voice that came from her computer sounded awfully terrified. "Whatever it was, it left the mansion moments ago.

Two of my men fainted at the sight of it. I've had to call an ambulance. It's just me on the door now…"

Socket bit her lip and trotted after Yobi. Before she could reach him, he slumped to the floor onto his front. She stopped at his side and bent down to shake him awake, but she snatched her paw back as his shoulder nearly burnt her. A fever?

"Has the ambulance arrived yet?" she asked.

"Not yet, Mayor."

"Then when it does, tell them there's a casualty up here, too."

"Roger!"

She groaned and sank to her bottom, and threw her computer onto the tiled floor. "Great! Now what am I meant to do?"

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 23

Part Three - Invasion

Chapter Twenty Three

Tracer stepped out of the mini market, clutching a fresh cigar in two claws while his other paw tucked the newly bought pack into the inside pocket of his trench coat. Clean air washed over him and he took in a deep breath of it before reaching for his lighter. Widget scratched behind his ear with a rear paw then looked up at him with a little grin. Before the eevee could speak, a loud ring came from Tracer's pocket.

The delphox reached inside and pulled out his pocket computer. Socket. He let out a long sigh and stubbed out his cigar on the wall of the building before answering. It was better than letting it burn away to nothing.

"Yes, Mayor?" He recoiled slightly from the screen. Oddly enough, she had an ice pack pressed against her jaw. "Have you had a tumble, ma'am?"

"No, I have not had a tumble," she snapped. "I'm ringing you as a last resort, Tracer. I know you're terribly busy rounding up space pi - wait a moment. Are you in Meta City?"

Tracer glanced around at the high buildings and clear sky then nodded. "Yes. Not too far from your office if you want me to meet you there?"

"No. No, that won't be appropriate at all. You are meant to be in the outskirts! What are you doing in my city?"

"Buying cigars," he said. "They don't sell them in the outskirts, and I'm not reducing myself to those thin, vile sticks they try to pass off as cigarettes."

Socket sighed and removed the ice pack from her face to reveal a rather large, red bump around her jaw.

"Please tell me you didn't bring that ragamuffin of an eevee with you?" she groaned.

Tracer glanced down at Widget who returned his look with raised eyebrows. He flinched away and looked around blankly at the buildings. To cover his tracks, Tracer pretended he was doing nothing more than trying to locate the source of a convenient siren.

"Of course not," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Can anyone else hear this call?" she asked.

"I can lower my voice."

"Good. Do that. Now listen, this is of dire importance, Tracer, and under no circumstances are you to let this out." She paused to retrieve a fresh ice pack off Tweak. "A human has found their way into System. I tried to apprehend it, but it attacked me, as you can see."

Tracer raised an eyebrow and leant back against the wall. "A human? Are you sure you're not sick, Mayor?"

"No, I am not sick. They attacked me, then escaped into the streets. Goodness knows where they are now. Two of my guards fainted and the one who didn't is receiving expensive therapy to deal with the shock! Before some unfortunate catastrophe unfolds, I need to you apprehend this human and bring it back to me."

"All right." Tracer scratched his ear. He didn't remotely believe the gothitelle's nonsense. Too many late nights, that's what it was. He sighed. "What does it look like?"

"At the moment, an ape-like creature with long black hair, wearing a white robe."

"At the moment?" he repeated.

"Yes. At other times it looks like the prehistoric pokemon, archeops."

Widget let out a loud laugh and shook his head. "She really has gone mad."

Socket's face fell and she dropped the ice pack. "You did bring that ragamuffin with you!"

Widget grimaced and mouthed a quick apology to Tracer. The delphox shook his head and sighed.

"Sorry, Mayor," he said. "Go on. Human. Archeops."

"You don't remotely believe me, do you?" she said. "Well, that can be easily rectified. I am going to forward you the CCTV footage. It may aid you in your search. Do be careful. We have this creature listed as 'dangerous and unstable'. Also be aware I will pay you well for your services. We'll cover that in the email."

The image cut out and Tracer lowered his computer with another sigh. She really did sound like she believed it, and if she was willing to send him CCTV footage then something must have happened. Maybe something that had been completely misunderstood? A rogue attack from another psychic type pokemon inflicting the gothitelle with an illusion. Maybe even a rogue zorua or zoroark had invaded the mansion disguising itself as a monster the mayor had described as a human. Those things were grotesque in pictures.

His computer beeped and he opened up the email. One video file, marked with the current day's date. He crouched down enough for Widget to see and lit up his cigar as he waited for it to load.

The image was crisp, showing every detail of colour in the sparse room. The same date stood in the top right corner, joined by seconds rolling by beside the time. Under the green and white sheets was some kind of bird, but it wasn't a bird for long. It switched to some

strange creature sprawled on the bed, snoring loudly. Socket strolled in and stood there, watching it. Tracer raised his eyebrow and removed his cigar to puff out a stream of smoke.

"If this is an alien creature," he said to Widget, "then why has she given it a bed?"

The eevee shrugged. "Peace offering?"

Tracer grunted and continued watching the video. The creature's form changed again shortly before the room filled with several other pokemon. Two of them he'd only seen in paintings. Legendary. What were they doing there? Socket leant forward to touch the creature and it span around to bite her.

"Certainly hostile," said Widget. "Pretty cool looking though, huh?"

Tracer said nothing as he watched the rest of the video. They'd given it some form of tablet, and after it took it, it sat in its white-robed form, stable. Then, it attacked. Smacking the gothitelle right across the jaw before taking the jar of tablets and strolling from the room. So it had wanted the tablets. Whatever it was, it clearly had no control over its shape-shifting ability. Had the tablets fixed that?

The pair watched the video one more time, then sat in silence against the shop's cold, stone wall. The video footage itself had been hard enough to digest. From the nature of the transformation, it wasn't a zoroark. Or, if it was, they were highly skilled. But why would a zoroark have wanted the tablets? Most of Meta City was filled with psychic types. Even those strange legendary creatures accompanying Socket were rumored to have been psychic type. A zoroark could have made short work of them all. So what was this creature doing? What was Socket doing?

"So," Widget said, dragging the delphox back into reality. "That's a human?"

"Seemingly."

"Doesn't look like any of the ones I've seen in history books." He paused. "The archeops is pretty on point, though."

Tracer 'hmm'd and scrolled through the email. The price Socket was willing to pay was certainly generous. Maybe she was aware how dangerous the human really was, and knew he'd be risking his life. Nevertheless, things didn't add up. Why would she give a dangerous creature a bed? Why show him if it was secret? Why lie? Of course, she hadn't lied outright. She'd said she'd apprehended the creature. That meant taken into custody. Bed or not, it was in her custody at the time. But still… was she helping it? Trying to coax it out of posing a threat by being welcoming? Or was it something much more sinister?

"Are we taking the job?" Widget asked all too keenly. "'Cos this has got me pretty excited, I must admit."

"Yes. We're taking the job." Tracer sent out a stream of smoke then flicked ash into the drain. "But I am beginning to wonder," he said slowly, "if Socket has told me the entire truth."

…

Annie trudged through the dirt-ridden streets. It was a stark contrast from the bustling city. Enough to make one wonder if they'd stepped through yet another porthole into another world.

It also stunk.

Boarded up buildings made up the most of the scenery, their yellowing stonework marred with various posters. Outdated concerts; clubs; products; video games; wanted criminals. All of it was covered with graffiti. A lot of it was insults aimed at the mayor, some of which still dripped with fresh paint.

She kept her eyes forward, scanning the route ahead. It was quiet. Good. She had grown tired of the looks and screams from the

pokemon in the city. Their obnoxious voices had given her a headache. Despite the stench, it was a nice change of pace.

Blinds across the road rattled and she caught a round face staring out at her, but it didn't linger long enough for her to get a good look. The blinds whizzed shut, blocking out the peeking tom.

She folded her arms and pouted. "How am I supposed to get back home?"

She stood still, mulling over the recent events. If she was in the world she'd left, only later, and pokemon didn't know what humans were… did that mean they eventually did go back home? She scratched her chin and looked up at the yellow-tinted clouds.

"So I time traveled… if I'm a time archeops then I should be able to get back myself." Pause. "One would think. Now how do I do that?"

Her hand found the pill bottle in her pocket. Magic pills that held her form. All she needed to do was time it right then she could hold the form of the archeops and work out how to get back.

Something shuffled ahead of her. Whimpering. Someone was crying? Whatever it was, they were limping. Or crawling. She couldn't tell.

She crept forwards, following the sound to a building slightly taller than the rest. Wooden steps ran up to the door that stunk of rot, and looked like something had turned them into a snack then given up. The whimpering came from beneath them. A small, fish-like creature floundered and flopped, dragging itself along the damp ground. Its eyes were screwed shut, and it was leaving behind a trail of red.

Annie stooped and grabbed it in both hands, lifting it up to her face. The creature yelped and opened its eyes, which widened slowly as it took her in.

"What are you crying for, little fish?" she asked.

Its mouth dropped wide open and it let out a panicked scream. She looked back over her shoulder, turning her head left and right.

"What? Is someone following me?" she asked.

"What are you?" The fish's voice was male, young. A choked sob came from his throat. "Don't eat me!"

Annie frowned down at the orange and white fish. "Eat you?" Her eyes fell on the red lacerations in his side. "Oh… I thought you'd crashed into some paint."

He shook his head, wincing with the effort. "No. I'm trying to get home…"

She lowered him slightly to eye the buildings. "Which one is your home?"

"The river," he said. "I live in the river…"

His voice was awfully weak, and growing weaker with each passing moment. Of course. Fish. River. It all made sense. The poor creature needed water. She tucked him under one arm and trotted along the road past the rotting stairs. If the fish was going to stand any chance at living, then she was going to have to find him water. Any kind of water. Enough to transfer him in.

Her mind lurched back to that blind and she turned one-eighty and made her way back to the house. It wasn't too far away. She found it instantly, since that round, orange face was staring out at her again. It vanished, but she reached the door and banged on it with such force it shook.

No answer.

She took the handle and forced it open, almost walking straight into the orange pokemon. Loose skin hung around his waist like baggy pants, and a sickly pale red mowhawk stood erect in the middle of

his head. His sleepy brown eyes narrowed at her and he raised a paw to shove her away.

"Get out!" he snapped. "I don't know what you are, but we don't want you here."

She held up the fish. "I need water for this."

"Go find your own water!" he growled. "We're on short supply here. I ain't givin' out charity!"

"But he's dying," she said. "Just give me some water so I can take him back home."

The baggy pokemon's leer fell away to be replaced by surprise. He opened his mouth to speak, but all that came out was an 'uhm'.

"What's going on, Trojan?" Another pokemon strode into the hallway.

This one Annie recognized. A skuntank. Her long tail wasn't carried along her back like she'd expected from pictures. Instead it was dragged behind her like a purple carpet. She eyed Annie curiously. Fearlessly, actually. Then her eyes went to the fish.

"Did I hear you right?" she asked Annie. "You want to help that goldeen?"

"Goldeen?" Annie looked down at the fish. He was panting, now. His little gills fluttering back and forth. "Is that what you are? Well, yes. He's lost, like me. I want to get him back home."

The skuntank frowned slightly, inclining her head on one side. "It looks like he escaped from the fishery."

"Fishery?"

"That's where they turn pokemon like your goldeen friend there into food." She looked up at Annie. "Meat, to be precise."

Annie almost dropped the goldeen. "Pardon?"

"Meat," the orange pokemon, Trojan, spat. "You know what that is? Or are you an oblivious vegan?"

"Oh, I know what meat is. But I've not tasted any in years." Annie looked down at the goldeen again. His eyes were wide open, almost bulging from his head. "Doesn't seem very nice here, though." She turned to the other two pokemon. "How would you like being turned into kebabs and burgers?"

The skuntank looked up at Trojan and nodded to the stairs behind him. "Get her some water."

Before Trojan could mount the stairs, a firm "No" stopped him in his tracks.

Yet another pokemon, this one resembling a tall owl, strolled from the room behind the skuntank. The most alarming thing about him was the silver, ornamental sheath over his beak which ended in a vicious point.

"The water we have will kill him in a heartbeat." The owl reached behind Annie's head with his wing for a metallic quiver of arrows and threw them over his shoulders. "I'll get some from the river. Hopefully he'll survive long enough."

"Oh, come on, Waveform." The skuntank sighed. "You take that quiver everywhere. What you really need is a bucket."

He fired her a glare over his shoulder. "I'll get one from the outhouse." He nodded to the goldeen. "Patch his wounds and keep him moist."

Trojan folded his arms and huffed. "Guess I'll go and find some thread and needles then." He clambered up the stairs, muttering to himself. "Helping a flippin' water dweller. What a joke."

The skuntank nodded for Annie to follow her into the kitchen. A large wooden table stood in the center, surrounded by chairs. Six in total. The sink was overflowing with dirty crockery and the work top looked like it needed a jolly good scrub. Annie flopped into one of the seats and set the goldeen on the table.

"Wait! Wait!" The skuntank rose up onto her hind legs, clutching a towel in her forepaws. "Lift him back up. There'll be blood everywhere."

There certainly was blood everywhere. The towel did a good job at soaking it up, and the goldeen was set back down on top of it. His eyes were screwed shut as his breaths came in shallow bursts.

"How long ago did you find him?" the skuntank asked.

"Shortly before I came here," said Annie. "I don't know how long exactly. Maybe seven minutes and thirty two seconds. I know I'm a time archeops, but… I don't know about time details."

The skuntank's brow knit together and she opened her mouth to speak, but was cut off as a small tin clattered onto the table. Trojan threw himself down into a chair and leant back, pushing the seat onto two legs as he kicked his feet up onto the table.

"What the jack is a 'time archeops'?" he scoffed.

"An archeops who can travel through time," Annie explained. "Although I don't recall trying. I'm trying to get back to my own time, but I haven't the foggiest how."

The two pokemon exchanged glances.

"Well, maybe you can explain a bit more once we've helped this goldeen," said the skuntank. She reached for the tin and clawed it open. "My name is Webber - Web for short - and the grump there is Trojan. The decidueye who just left is Waveform. We're the only

three pokemon that live here." She looked up at Annie while clutching a fine needle between two claws. "What's your name?"

"Annie." Annie paused. "I think."

Trojan raised an eyebrow. "You think?"

"Well, I'm considering changing it to Time Archeops."

"Forgive me for saying this," said Web. "But you look nothing like an archeops."

"I don't at the moment, no." Annie took some thread from the box and began to unwind it. "I go between forms. Right now, I'm a human. Pretty stabilized thanks to these magic pills I got off the mayor."

She pulled the tub from her gown pocket and slammed it onto the table.

Trojan's large eyes widened. "You got those off the mayor?!"

"Yeh. She gave them to me. Said they'd hold my form."

"Just… gave them to you?"

"Well, she wanted something in return. So I gave her a good clobbering and now I'm here." She pointed to the needle in Web's claws. "You might wanna sterilize that. Got any fire?"

"Yes… right." Web shook herself and looked over at Trojan. "Light?"

Trojan reached into his baggy pant-like fur and tossed a lighter over to Web. A small smile played at his lips and he chuckled.

"You clobbered the mayor?" he asked.

"Darn right I did," said Annie. "I don't do paybacks. Besides, something didn't smell right. She had this weird look in her eye.

Hungry. Made me paranoid."

She craned her neck around to look over her shoulder at the wall. The window was awful grimy. She could barely see through it. Oh well.

"Have we got any sitrus berries, Trojan?" Web asked. "He's gonna need some if he's gonna survive."

Annie looked back round at the skuntank. She'd pulled the goldeen closer as she stitched up his wounds. Most of them were concentrated on his right side, and the formerly off-white tea towel was dyed a bright red.

"You don't think he'll survive?" Annie asked.

Web shook her head. "I wouldn't hold your breath, girl. He's lost a lot of blood."

"Huh." Annie leant back in her seat and tucked her arms behind her head as she watched the skuntank work. "How's he supposed to get back home if he doesn't survive?"

"In an urn," said Trojan bluntly.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Annie. "How's he meant to swim around in an urn? Way too small."

Trojan raised an eyebrow and pushed himself back up in his seat. "Are all humans off-key like you?"

"Trojan!" Web snapped. "Don't be rude."

He snorted and stood up. "I don't have time for this. Once the goldeen is fixed, both he and the… time archeops… can get the jack outta here. I want nothin' to do with any of them."

"'Either'," Web corrected. "Make yourself useful and grab some sitrus berries from the larder."

He snorted and stomped from the room.

"Don't take it personally, girl," Web told Annie. "He lost his brother last week."

"That was careless," said Annie.

The skuntank frowned slightly and snipped off the loose thread. "I'd hardly call it careless. He was awful sick. This air does no favours for the body." She paused. "You said you arrived yesterday?"

Annie nodded, and Web's muzzle creased in thought.

"So you really aren't from here?" she asked cautiously. "You haven't a clue what's going on?"

"Nope!" Annie yawned widely. "Don't rightly care, either."

"Oh, I think you'll care." Web began sewing up one of the goldeen's smaller wounds. "You seemed rather upset that pokemon eat meat. To be honest, I'm not keen, but beggers can't be choosers. If you got those pills off the mayor, then I'm assuming you were in Meta City. So you'll have seen the difference between Spool and Meta."

"Yeh, it stinks here," said Annie.

Web chuckled. "Proxy City smells a lot worse, believe me. But anyway, the air is poisonous. Ideally you're meant to wear a mask, but I severely doubt they filter out everything."

"But you're a poison type, right?" Annie asked. "So it wouldn't bother you."

"Doesn't matter," said Web. "It affects everyone, whether you're grass, poison or steel. It's pollution. A poison in its own right in that it kills everything. If you're exposed to it for long enough, you'll eventually get cancerous tumors afflicting your lungs and air ways."

Annie scratched her nose. "Huh. That doesn't sound pleasant."

"Far from it." Web cut the thread and examined the goldeen's remaining wounds. "They don't look as bad. They'll heal on their own, given time. But a freshwater fish like this isn't going to survive long here."

She waddled to the sink and washed her paws. The water that came out was tinted with a faint yellow. Web grabbed another tea towel and wet it thoroughly. This was tossed gently over the goldeen, and the skuntank joined Annie at the table.

"It's not the best water," she said. "But I don't want him to dry out."

Trojan stormed back in and tossed yellow berries onto the table. They bounced about, clattering onto the floor and bouncing off walls. Annie shrieked and dived under the table with a cry of "Bakudan!"

"There's your berries," said Trojan. "Now I'm goin' out for a bit. Don't you dare follow me."

Web gathered them up, casting Annie an apologetic look.

"Seriously, Trojan!" she said. "And don't go graffitiing the detective's office again!"

Annie crawled out from beneath the table and pulled herself back into her chair. She grabbed one of the sitrus berries and examined it carefully.

"I know these," she said. "They gave them to me at the hospital. Sour things, these."

"They do the job," said Web. "Hopefully they'll perk him up, but… anyway. Where is it you're going?"

"No clue." Annie set the berry back down. "I was looking for a way to get back home. But I guess I have to wait until the tablets wear off then I can change back into an archeops and try to re-enact what I was doing before I ended up here."

"Well, I certainly hope you manage." Web paused her peeling of one of the orange fruit. "I've never met a human before. But I have heard stories. If you're from a different time, is it the same world as this one?"

"System? Aye."

"Before you go anywhere," Web said slowly, "would you mind telling me what it's like?"

Annie chuckled and leant back in her seat. "I'm afraid I didn't see much outside the white walls of a mental ward."

Web sighed and finished peeling the fruit. "That's a shame. I'd like to know if it really did have trees everywhere, and how clean the air was."

The door opened again and the decidueye strolled in, sloshing water over the edge of a green bucket.

"Got this from the river," he said. "Should be okay for a goldeen, right?"

"Perfect," said Web.

She dropped the fruit to retrieve the bucket, but Waveform pushed past her to place it beside the worktop. Instead, Web scooped up the goldeen and popped him into the water with a soft 'plop'.

"He won't drown, will he?" Annie asked.

Waveform looked over his shoulder at her and narrowed his eyes. "He's a fish."

"Doesn't mean he can't drown," said Annie.

Waveform shook his head and sighed.

"Did you run into Trojan?" Web asked him.

"Yeh. Told me this human hit the mayor," he said. "Well… 'clobbered' was the word he used."

Annie yawned and stretched, drawing another look from the decidueye. Something flashed behind his eyes. Curiosity? No… Whatever it was, it made her a little nervous. She masked her fidgeting with another yawn.

"You have anywhere to stay?" he asked.

Web looked up at her, waiting for an answer.

Annie scratched her nose again in thought. "I don't think so."

"Then she can stay here," said Waveform. "Fine by me, anyway."

"I was hoping you and Trojan might agree to that," said Web. "At least until her friend here is fit to leave."

"The little fish isn't my friend," said Annie. "I don't have friends. I was trying to help the lost fish get home, that is all."

Web smiled and a small chuckle left her nose. "That's what friends do, girl."

Annie waved a hand and stood up. "Whatever. I'm tired. Is there a bed? Or do I have to sleep in hay?"

"There's beds." Web moved past Waveform towards the door. "Come with me, girl. I'll show you around."

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 24

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows!

Chapter Twenty Four

Two disks down and three to go. That's what Macro kept telling himself as he looked over the list of four remaining locations. Botnet City, Cyan City, Meta City, and The Cache. Since he'd hit two and retrieved two disks, he was getting dangerously close to eventually hitting the red herring. If there even was one. There was always the possibility Surge had been incorrect in discovering there were only five disks.

His eyes lingered over Meta City for a moment. The huge red cross on his internal map. Even the name reeked of danger, and after DL's revelation that yet another hole had been torn in time and space right in the centre of it, he was even less inclined to venture there. Surely Socket knew DL could pinpoint these rifts. What if she'd simply been trying to lure him in?

"Struggling?" Switch poked his head around the cockpit door.

Macro looked up at him and sighed before turning back to the list of cities.

"You could say that," he said.

The talonflame strutted into the room and peered over his shoulder. Heat radiated from his feathers and Macro found himself instinctively feeling for his laser.

"I'd like to see Cyan City, personally," said Switch.

Macro snorted. "You've been here for what… a day? And you already have a list of sight seeing destinations?"

"Not exactly," said Switch. "Back home, I spent a lot of time in a place called Cyan Island. A drifting continent. You know them, right? They float over System, and I'm guessing it's been moved to a city status now. I want to know what changes have been made."

Macro raised an eyebrow at him over his shoulder. "Drifting continent? Don't be ridiculous. Cyan City, like every other city in System Sky, is an artificial slab holding towering skyscrapers above the clouds. It can't go anywhere. It's encased in a perspex dome like everywhere else up here."

"So what's happened to the drifting continents?" Switch asked. "Are they barren now?"

"There are no 'drifting continents'," said Macro. "Rumors and legends like you humans and that Fracture nonsense."

"You still don't believe the Fracture even happened?"

"Oh, I believe it now, but it's still nonsense. If it weren't for the fact I'd managed to obtain a human, I'd still think it were all fairy tales."

Switch let out a sigh and ruffled his feathers. "Then what happened to Cyan Island?"

"I haven't a clue. Some say they crashed and that's why they don't float any more. But there's no evidence to support that."

"Then… has anyone searched the oceans? They had engines in them, Macro. And they were huge! They couldn't just vanish. There must be remains somewhere, right?"

Macro stared at him for a moment, then flicked his computer off and stuffed it back into his pouch.

"All right, Switch, I'll make you a deal." He shifted his weight to one foot and pointed a claw at the talonflame. "I'm gonna show you

System Ground, and you can see for yourself this ain't your world no more. All right?"

Switch frowned but said nothing, keeping his golden eyes on Macro as he moved out of the cockpit.

The mawile poked his head out of the exit hatch, squinting in the bright sunlight. Anchor was still fiddling with the small wishiwashi turret, whistling a jaunty tune as he worked away with DL sat beside him. The pachirisu's nose was streaked with grease, and she clutched a spanner in her paws, watching the granbull intently.

She looked tiny compared to the large, pink bulldog, but she wasn't the least bit intimidated by him. With the belt around her waist she didn't look out of place either, and at some point she'd acquired a green neckerchief that did look out of place amongst her blue markings. Sunlight reflected off her white fur with an almost dazzling intensity. Macro tore his eyes away and cleared his throat to address the granbull.

"Almost done, Anchor?" he asked. "Kinda wanting to fly soon."

"Yup," said Anchor. "Just gotta fasten this panel back in place. It got a bit bent, so it's tricky, but we're nearly there."

DL looked up at Macro and smiled. That smile alone flooded his chest with warmth, killing any retort on his tongue. He snatched his head back inside the hatch and leant back against it. With a sigh, he tugged his goggles free and ran a paw over his face.

"I really need to do something about this," he muttered.

…

"Where do we even find a human?" Widget asked.

The eevee skipped along beside Tracer, his mask completely hiding his face. It was near impossible to tell if he was joking or genuinely

curious without seeing that cheeky glimmer in his eye.

"I've no idea," Tracer answered. "And since we're forbidden to interview anyone about this, then finding its trail is going to be incredibly difficult."

"Didn't Socket's guards faint at the sheer sight of it?" Widget asked. "'Cos I'd say we just look for a trail of stunned and terrified civilians."

"I'm beginning to wonder if you're being sincere."

Tracer stopped at his office and opened the door. Defrag didn't even look up from her desk, too focused on whatever task she was occupied with.

"Of course I'm being sincere!" Widget hopped on his toes with enthusiasm.

Before he'd even fully entered the office, he started to remove his mask. Tracer slammed the door quickly in a desperate bid to prevent the eevee from being poisoned. Despite Widget's claims to be immune to sickness, he was taking no chances.

Widget looked up at Tracer then nodded to Defrag. "We telling her?"

"Telling me what?" The lopunny flicked her long ear back to look over her shoulder.

Tracer shook his head at Widget and sighed. The eevee gave him an apologetic grin and slinked over to his desk. Tracer flopped heavily into his chair and turned on his computer.

"There's been… a problem in Meta City," he explained. "But it's top secret and if I tell you, it must not leave this office."

Defrag turned her chair fully to face him and crossed her legs. "Go on."

"I trust your professional attitude, Defrag-"

"But not enough to tell me before Widget spilled the beans," she retorted.

Tracer rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed. "Let me finish, please."

"No. I get a little tired of being left out of your investigations." She folded her arms and her nose creased in a frown. "You do this all the time. It's like I'm just some kind of desk jockey to you."

"You are not a desk jockey, Defrag. You're admin. You do the administration work, which is just as, if not more, important!"

"But it's less fun." She paused. "Now tell me, what's going on?"

"There's a human in System," said Widget.

Defrag stared over her shoulder at him. Widget picked up his cup and sipped at it with all the nonchalance he could muster.

"Don't insult my intelligence, eevee," she said dangerously. "We all know humans don't exist."

"He's not lying." Tracer pulled out his computer, along with a fresh cigar, and opened Socket's email. "See for yourself."

Defrag took the computer and the room fell into silence as she watched the footage. Any sound had been muted out, but the image was as clear as day. A shape shifting human, lying in one of the mayor's rooms, resulting in the gothitelle being assaulted.

Once it had played out, Defrag lowered the computer to her lap and met Tracer's eyes.

"Is this some kind of joke?" The waver in her voice betrayed her anxiety.

"Oh, it's no joke." Tracer gently retrieved his computer from her grip. "Socket sent me the footage herself. She seemed very intent on

catching this shape shifting human. Evidence states that its highly dangerous, as you've seen for yourself."

"If it were dangerous, why not kill Socket?"

Tracer shrugged and lit his cigar. "Maybe they simply didn't want to? Either way, assaulting a figure of authority tells me its dangerous and has no fear or respect for those around it."

"And did you see the way it just left the room?" Widget feigned a shudder. "Terrifying."

"You're not remotely scared," Defrag snorted.

"Nope," said Widget. "Crazy human? Bring it on."

"You think it might be crazy?" Defrag asked.

"Of course! Did you even see it? It has crazy written all over its face!" Widget took another swig of his drink. "Either that, or they just have no emotion whatsoever."

"History states humans were indeed emotional beings," said Tracer.

"Ordinarily, I'd be inclined to correct you that they are in fact fairy tails," said Defrag. "But after seeing that, I don't know what to believe any more."

Tracer blew out a stream of smoke and leant back against his desk. "You don't think it's enough evidence?"

"It could easily be fake," said Defrag. "I mean, we have the technology to create convincing videos. The only thing that makes me think it might even remotely be real is the fact that Socket sent it to you, and asked you to capture this creature."

Tracer shrugged. "Then I guess we'll have to accept that, for the time being, there's a potentially dangerous creature living in System. We'll

have to be extra careful, and make it our number one priority to catch it."

"'Our'?" Defrag asked.

"Yes, 'our'. You are every bit as involved as Widget and I. I want you to scour the internet and dig up every shred of evidence you can about where this human is located. Sightings, hoaxes or otherwise. Suspicious damage, crimes, missing pokemon. Anything that might lead us to this creature's whereabouts."

Defrag pursed her lips and glanced sideways at her computer. "So, yet again, I'm to remain in the office?"

"Not indefinitely." Tracer turned his chair so he was facing his desk. "I've no idea how powerful this creature is. We might well need your assistance in the field."

…

The ship was finally ready to go, with Cyan Island as the next main destination. Macro stood beside his chair, watching Pulse City turn out of their field of vision as Wildcard Gamma pulled out of the docks.

Cyan Island may well be their next destination, but there was something he desperately wanted to do first. That was prove to Switch that the world he knew was no more. Any sign of the 'drifting continents' that were rumored to have once filled System's skies were gone.

Macro hadn't believed in them. He hadn't believed in any of it, and the human's constant yammering about things of legend were really beginning to grate on him. If showing him what state System now lay in would shut him up then he was more than keen to do so.

Raster Town. That was the destination he'd chosen. It was one of - if not the most - worst places on System, almost tying with the

Analogue Isles. A smirk tugged at his lips and he glanced over at the navigation desk. It would be dawn by the time they arrived at Raster Town. Somewhat safer than it would be at night. Somewhat.

Switch huddled in the corner of the cockpit with his wings slightly spread. The motion of the ship turning clearly unsettled him. Macro had never considered a flying pokemon wouldn't like traveling in a flying vehicle, but in some way it made sense. Having no control over the movements, and only having two legs and a pair of wings to balance with, he could only begin to imagine the difficulties.

DL strolled into the cockpit, yawning widely. Her fur was still damp from her late shower. Either she didn't know how to use the fur drier or she couldn't be bothered with it. Her fur stuck out at funny angles around her shoulders, and crinkled around her ears. Somehow, she still managed to pull off the look.

She clambered up into his seat and he looked down at her, forcing a leer.

"Why do you insist on stealing my seat?" he grumbled.

"I'm not stealing it, I'm borrowing it," she said. "Besides, there's plenty of room."

"It's the captain's seat," he said.

"You're not using it." She fastened the seatbelt around her waist and leant back, keeping her melted chocolate eyes on his. "Would you rather I fall about, instead?"

"She has a point," said Switch. "You really could use two extra seats."

"I'd vouch for three," said Matrix. "We're picking up new pokemon at an alarming rate recently."

"We have no room for any more," said Macro. "We've already filled the two spare bedrooms we had. If we pick up anyone else, we'd have to share." He frowned. "And I'm not sharing with Anchor."

"Don't worry 'bout that, Cap'n," said the granbull. "I don't quite fancy sharing with you, either. You're a cover hog."

Anchor met Macro's glare and laughed, striking the dashboard with his paw."

"You can't talk to me like that," said Macro.

"Why?" Switch asked before Anchor could even throw a playful retort. "You talk to everyone else like that."

"Because I'm the captain." Macro rounded on him and his right paw fondled the handle of his laser. "You need to watch it, human, or you'll find yourself on the receiving end of my water laser."

"Water pistol." Switch smirked then winked.

Macro opened his mouth to throw a remark but caught DL's concerned face in his peripheral vision. Instead, he let out a sigh and ran a paw over his face.

"I'm getting a headache," he said. "I'm gonna get to bed. And don't anyone dare disturb me." He threw this last comment at the pachirisu.

She sank slightly in his seat, but that concerned expression never fell. Was she worried for him or for Switch? He didn't know, and he didn't want to know.

"I'll be back out before dawn." He stomped from the cockpit.

"What if we need you?" Anchor's voice froze him at the door.

"Define 'need'," said Macro.

"Erm… government fleet attack?"

Macro snorted. "Throw up the shields and fly fast. Maybe tie Switch down so he doesn't break anything."

As he stormed down the corridor, he heard Switch ask Anchor in a wavering voice;

"Does he mean bones or computers?"

Macro slammed his bedroom door behind him and threw himself onto the bed, flinching as the handle of his right laser jabbed him in the kidney. He wriggled out of his belt and tossed it unceremoniously onto his chair. With a groan, he fell onto his back and pressed his paws over his face. Things were beginning to get rather confusing.

Ordinarily, he wouldn't help anyone directly. Space pirates took on jobs - heists, for the sake of a better word. His jobs had always consisted of raiding machine and weapon parts to sell on the black market or to clients; obtaining information about the state of an area; invading government buildings to obtain maps for those who wanted to raid it but wanted low risk (and taking the things they wanted in the process).

Having unfamiliar pokemon on board was never part of the question. Switch's situation was beyond unusual, and as for DL, obtaining her memory disks could have been described as heists in their own right.

DL…

Scratch that. Things were becoming ridiculously confusing.

He was beginning to get rather worried - no, scared - that he was developing feelings for the pachirisu. Feelings brought pain. He needed to nip that in the bud and fast.

Space pirates always looked out for Number One.

If he was going to stop things growing any more confusing than they already were, he needed to do something about DL. Of course, he couldn't just let a pokemon without her memories walk around System on her own.

He groaned again and dragged his claws down his face. That was the gentlemon talking. After all her memories were retrieved, that was it. She had to go.

…

Wildcard Gamma chugged along in the sky at a steady pace. The cockpit was awfully quiet, but it also meant it was much less tense. Macro was still in his room, refusing to come out. Not that anyone had even dared to wake him for fear of laser retaliation. DL was still sat in his seat beside Anchor, watching the world outside with a look of awe. Anchor hummed to himself, carefully steering the hulking mass of a ship through the darkening sky. Matrix monitored the navigation screen, or at least that's what he was meant to be doing. The radar had been minimized to occupy a quarter of the screen while he played some strange retro game Switch hadn't seen in years even inside his own time line.

The talonflame squatted down in a corner, fearing he'd be tossed back and forth around the ship like the pixel ball on Matrix's screen, but things were going so smoothly it was like they weren't moving at all.

"Everything seems…" Switch cleared his throat as he thought over how to word things. "Very relaxed."

"Mm-hmm," said Anchor. "We have our orders, and now we're simply sticking to them without claws at our back."

Switch chuckled and looked over at the door. "Can I ask you something?"

"Ask away."

"Is he always so… strict with you?"

Anchor burst out laughing and struck the dashboard with a heavy paw. DL leapt slightly in her seat and watched the dog's arm warily.

"That's a funny way of putting it," said Anchor. "But I'd keep your voice down. Don't go blaring that around the Cap'n."

"I'm serious," said Switch. "The way he talks to you makes me wonder why you stick around."

Anchor fell silent, the jovial smile melting from his face. DL looked up at him curiously, while Matrix wound his antennae in his paw and looked at each of the other pokemon in turn.

"It's a long story, Switch," Anchor explained. "I can tell you, but… if I hear his door open, I'm gonna stop. You all right with that?"

Switch cast a cautious glance into the hallway, then nodded.

"Okay. Prepare yourself." Anchor pushed the steering stick forwards then looked over his shoulder at the talonflame. "This crew ain't always been the way it was, you know. I met Macro a long time ago. Six years ago, to be exact. Was only a wee kid at the time, myself."

"Kid?!" Switch's eyes flew wide open. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Pull the other one!"

Anchor roared with laughter again and looked away. "Nope. I tell no lie, Switch."

"Then how old is…" Switch fell silent, fearing the mawile might respond to the sound of his name and cut off the granbull's story. So he merely nodded down the hallway.

"The Cap'n's older than me by like… three years, I think. I lose count. Too many crew members and I don't do numbers." He paused as he steered the ship past a high cloud. "Anyway, like I said. It's not always been this way. He used to belong to another crew, quite a mixed one. Can't remember the name, but when I met him there were just him and a young lass named Digit. Pretty little buneary, she was. Think he were soft on her."

DL's ear twitched and she looked up at the granbull.

"Anyway," he went on, "When I met Macro, it was in Seed City. He were stealin' sheet metal from one of the supply depots. I were gonna stop him initially, but when I spotted his lasers I knew he were a pirate. Terrified, I decided to help him. Carried several sheets back into one of the surrounding villages. Can't remember its name. Him and his friend were fixin' up a ship, see. Looked like a magikarp and he'd named it Wildcard. Pretty basic thing. Not one of them knew how to build a vehicle, and suffice to say the ship never even took off. Burst into flames, actually. We put it out and I told him I'd design the next one. That's when Wildcard Beta came along. He designed it, decided he wanted a huntail ship. Went with his alias. Way back then, he went by the name Hunter everywhere. It were the name given to him by his former captain.

"He told me exactly what happened. They'd been on a raid in the Analogue Isles, but run into another pirate fleet. This was all dragon types, and they decimated the ship's crew. In a bid to save Digit, Macro had got hit really bad by the leader - a garchomp wearin' steel claws. Almost lost his eye. But he managed to fight him off and get Digit to safety. After that, they decided to set up their own crew, but first they needed a ship.

"I were pretty moved and scared, if I'm honest, but I decided to join them. Personally, I felt he'd kill me if I didn't. But of course, I learned really soon he's got a heart bigger than he shows. Sadly, that weren't enough for Digit. Thanks to Macro's wiles, they were often at odds, and after a rather… unfortunate heist… she decided he couldn't take things seriously. Like everything was a joke. He takes too many

risks, I'll admit, but she couldn't take it any more. So she up and left, leavin' us down a navigator. Neither of us can navigate to save our lives, so we put out some feelers in Pulse City, and that's where we found Matrix, lurkin' in the Moonlight Lounge."

Matrix released his antennae and nodded towards the kitchen. "Cookie wasn't too far behind, either. We needed a cook."

"Could burn water, our Cap'n," said Anchor. "And I hate to cook."

Switch chuckled and gave another glance down the corridor. "So… you see through that icy exterior."

"Right through." Anchor gave him a warm smile. "Give it time, Switch. He ain't all bad. To be honest, he ain't got a bad bone in his body. Besides, someone has to keep him sane. I often fear if I weren't around, he'd take one risk too many and be dead in less than a week."

Switch nodded. "Makes sense. We all need someone." He paused, his mind going to the mental image of a huntail ship. "So… what happened to Wildcard Beta?"

Anchor took in a sharp breath through his teeth. "We don't talk about Wildcard Beta."

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 25

Chapter Twenty Five

As Wildcard Gamma descended below the clouds, the temperature inside began to escalate. The air conditioning whirred as it tried to keep the occupants cool, and Matrix buzzed his wings rapidly to keep his own body temperature down. The only one who had no complaints was Switch, huddled in the corner keeping his eyes on the windscreen.

"I think we're here." Macro stood and motioned for the talonflame to follow him.

"Five more minutes," said Matrix. "We're still passing over the desert, but the town is right ahead of us."

Macro nodded his acknowledgment, but went to the hatch anyway. It would take five minutes just to get set up. He reached into the cupboard inside the hatch and pulled out two masks. One for himself, one for Switch.

"What are these for?" Switch asked as he eyed the offered mask.

"Air's toxic," said Macro. "You breathe that stuff in, you'll die in days."

The talonflame didn't need telling twice. He took the mask and tugged it over his head with his talons. Macro fastened his in place, watching the large raptor struggle to get the mask on. It was certainly not designed for a bird, despite the beak-like nose piece.

Macro reached up to help Switch fasten it around his head, and he gave it a quick check over to make sure there were no gaps. It was actually a little on the small side.

"Thanks." Switch's voice came out muffled and he shook his head sharply.

"Don't dislodge it," Macro scoffed as he returned to fastening his own mask in place. "You don't want any of that air getting in."

"You said it's toxic." Switch turned the green glassy eye covers on him. "So surely you'd be immune, right?"

"Doesn't work like that. It's not toxic like say a nidoran or a salazzle. It's pollution. Even a poison type doesn't wanna breathe that stuff in."

"But surely grimer and muk would thrive?"

Macro shook his head. "They still have to breathe, Switch. That polluted air rots the lungs."

"So it's uninhabitable?" Switch asked.

"Completely." Macro leant back against the cupboard and looked out through the small window. "Pokemon cleaned up in places like Meta and Seed City. So efficiently that the local grimer and muk began to transform. With no sewage left to eat, they had to eat garbage instead, but then the civil war struck and all poison types were shunned to the toxic outskirts. Those transformed grimer and muk died out in mere days. You'd think something would adapt to be able to survive in those areas, but nope. No life can live in it."

Matrix's voice echoed out over the intercom. "Arriving in Raster Town now. Get ready to drop."

Anchor strode into the hatch and grabbed a large mask from the cupboard. It was over his face in seconds and he braced himself behind Macro.

"You're joining us, too?" Switch asked the granbull.

"Of course," said Anchor. "Wouldn't leave my Cap'n to fend for himself in the desert of all places."

Macro said nothing, but his jaw clenched tightly shut. Fire and ground types. Bane of his existence.

He grabbed the neon pink ladder and plummeted towards the barren landscape. Hot air assaulted his body and his pads began to sweat. Switch zipped past him like a red dart, but the ladder picked up speed, passing the talonflame and hitting the ground before he even had time to land. Anchor dropped down behind Macro and the pair of them looked up as Switch swooped gracefully down beside them.

The sand was red hot on Macro's pads and it wasn't even noon yet. He dreaded to think how hot Raster Town got during the middle of the day. He could already feel himself weakening.

"So this is Raster Town?" Switch hopped in a circle as he took in the scene. "The sky is yellow!"

"That's the pollution," said Anchor. "I wouldn't worry yourself over that. What you need to worry about is what's on the ground."

Switch looked down then followed Anchor's eyes towards the town.

They were right on the edge of it. Squat sandstone buildings dotted throughout the small town, many of them boarded up. It was a common sight in the outskirts of Meta City. Raster Town was one of the furthest towns away from the capital, and just like the outskirts it couldn't afford to keep shops open. Mainly because it struggled to fill them with produce in the first place.

Only a small number of pokemon were awake. Macro spotted a young larvitar scurrying about in the dusty streets with no sign of a parent. A few feet away on a rock outside the town, a salandit lay basking beside a gabite. Early risers. Neither of which he wanted a run-in with.

Macro tapped Switch on the wing and nodded past the basking reptiles.

"Follow me," he said.

Switch looked around warily and hopped after the two space pirates. Keeping one eye on the two sunbathing lizards, Macro led the talonflame around them. What he wanted to show him lay at the end of Raster Town. One of the very reasons it fell into such disrepair, if legends were to be believed.

A huge hulking mountain rose out of the ground, surrounded with small boarded-up houses and shops. Only one or two of the buildings even had pokemon living in them. The mountain, however, was barren. Dotted with ruins and the remains of blackened trees. Cacti had taken up growing over it, supported by the dry and sandy terrain.

"This," Macro said, "is what is believed to be the remains of a 'drifting continent'." He raised his paws in an air quote.

Switch stared up at it, his eyes wide behind the glass protectors.

"This?" he stuttered. "Why didn't they get it flying again? Why leave it?"

"I'm not even completely convinced it was one," said Macro. "But, if what they teach us in history books has any truth behind it, there are three of these mounds. Two of them are in the ocean. This one is said to have crushed half of Raster Town. Apparently they'd crashed once before, and they got them back in the air again. But when they crashed down about one hundred years later, they were deemed too dangerous and stripped of their mechanical parts. Rumours covering up a pile of tauros poop if you ask me."

Switch ducked beside the mound, trying to peer inside a tiny cave.

"I don't believe you," he said. "What really happened to them?"

"Is this not one?" Macro asked.

Switch flapped his wings and rose up to inspect higher up.

Macro sighed and shook his head. "I really thought this would put him to rest."

"He doesn't belong in this time line," said Anchor. "I think we need to get him back and fast."

"I agree. And then he'll be out of my fur."

A deep rumble shook the ground and Macro staggered backwards into Anchor. Sand exploded beside them and he looked up with a start, right into the gaping jaws of a steelix. The metal snake roared, revealing row upon row of lumpy alien growths. Not a tooth in sight. The stench of death and decay poured from its mouth, permeating the vents on Macro's mask and causing him to gag. The large spikes along the metal snake's segmented body rotated like a windmill, filling the air with a deafening grating screech.

Macro pressed his paws over his ears and moved behind Anchor. He really needed his gun, but that screech was too much to bare.

"Look out!"

Switch darted down from the mound, his body glowing orange with intense heat and distorting the air around him. He collided with the steelix, the pair of them exploding in flames. The steelix opened its mouth wide and roared as it surged sideways. Switch arced up into the air and swooped back down for a second attack.

Macro and Anchor leapt apart in a bid to avoid the intense heat radiating from the talonflame. Macro reached for his gun, quickly loading up his ground laser.

"I'm gonna blast this thing back into the hole it came from!" Macro barked.

"Don't be too harsh, Cap'n," Anchor warned him. "He's sick."

"Sick or not, he attacked us first."

Macro aimed his laser, firing out what looked like a stream of sand and dirt. It vanished as it collided with the steelix's body, and Switch recoiled back with a squawk of surprise. The huge metal snake hit the ground, throwing up a cloud of dusty sand. Switch screeched and flew backwards, shaking his head violently.

Macro swore under his breath and fired off another stream. There was no way any sand got through the bird's mask. It was impossible.

The steelix rolled backwards with the impact, his long tail flailing like a bludgeon. It came crashing down sideways, right towards the disoriented talonflame.

"Switch!" Anchor roared. "Move it!"

The granbull leapt towards him as Macro readied another shot to fire at the steelix's immense tail. His shot missed by a hair's breadth. Anchor collided with Switch head on, ramming him into the ground. He grunted and rolled backwards, pulling Switch out of harm's way.

The steelix's bludgeon of a tail came crashing down, and Switch let out a shriek of pain.

Anchor sat bolt upright, clutching his stomach with one paw. Macro let his gun fall to his side. There was no way the talonflame had been hit? Was there?

Macro stepped warily to the side. Switch flailed, flapping on his back as he strained to pull himself away from the steelix. That heavy tail had landed on the tip of his wing, pinning him to the ground.

Anchor stood up, keeping his paw clasped to his stomach. He shoved his other paw beneath the steelix's tail and lifted. Tendons showed in his arm as he strained beneath its weight, but it wouldn't so much as budge. He moved his arm from his stomach, leaving a tiny trail of blood as it trickled from his claws, and tried to hoist the tail up with both arms to no avail.

Macro raised his laser again and aimed it about a foot from the talonflame's pinned wing.

"Stand aside, Anchor."

Anchor looked back at him, confusion reflecting behind the green glass of his goggles. He looked from the laser to the talonflame and cautiously returned to Switch's side.

"Brace yourself, Switch," said Macro. "I'm gonna have to blast you free."

The talonflame seized his frantic flapping and snapped his head around to fix on Macro's laser. His golden eyes opened wide with fear and his entire body froze.

Macro fired.

Sand and dirt exploded beneath the steelix and talonflame, blowing the latter into the air with the intensity of a geyser. The steelix rolled sideways, creating a trail of dust that blocked out the sight of the mound and run-down town.

Switch squawked, flapping his wings helplessly as he tried to right himself. He came down on his back and turned in the air, using his wings to glide the rest of the way. Regardless, he still hit the ground with some force and he grunted with the impact. He skidded forward slightly, marring his underside with a sandy yellow-brown.

Anchor stood up slowly, his paw once again clasped to his gut.

"You all right, Switch?" he asked.

Switch winced and turned sideways, lifting his wounded wing cautiously. The effort alone caused him to whine. He rolled onto his back, using his talons to switch his form back to that of a human. Then both hands clasped around his ankle as he let out a rather loud scream.

Macro looked up with a start, checking the unconscious steelix and making sure no one in the town could see them. Switch was making a lot of noise despite the mask that must have been suffocating him. A gabite sat outside one of the bars, his neck straight as he listened to the racket. Fortunately he hadn't seen them, thanks to the angle of the mound.

"Change back!" Macro demanded.

Reluctantly, Switch released his ankle and pressed his watch, shrinking back down to a talonflame. Anchor dropped down beside him and checked his wing, much to the human's complaints.

"He's broke it," he said. "We're gonna have to get back to Wildcard and fast."

Macro rolled his eyes and tugged his computer from his pouch.

"Matrix?" he said into it.

The ribombee didn't reply with his voice. Instead, the words 'is there a problem?' appeared on the screen, followed by a smiley face.

It was no time for a smiley face.

"Yes, there's a problem!" Macro snapped. "I've got a wounded talonflame and I'm pretty sure Anchor's wounded as well. Send down the ladder."

'Just a moment' was the ribombee's response.

Macro sighed and stuffed his computer back into his pocket. He eyed the two wounded pokemon and shook his head. How on earth were they meant to get Switch back up there if Anchor only had one free arm to hoist himself up?

He pulled his computer back out again and said into it, "Maybe come down yourself, too, with some rope."

Moments later, the neon ladder flashed into place with metallic 'chinks'. It appeared long before Matrix did, and Macro had long since finished discussing his plan with Anchor.

The mawile kept a wary eye on Raster Town. So far, no one had ventured from it, and the steelix was still unconscious. Macro was beginning to worry he'd accidentally killed the huge steel snake, but due to the consistency of its body it wouldn't be easy to check without standing by its head, and there was no way he was putting himself anywhere near its deadly mouth.

Matrix landed beside them and unwound the rope from over his shoulder.

"I hope there's enough," he said. "What do you plan to do with it?"

Anchor released his abdomen, revealing two deep gashes just below his ribs. When Switch noticed them, he poured out a string of apologies interspersed with grunts at his own pain.

Anchor ignored them, instead hoisting the talonflame onto his shoulders. Macro grabbed the rope and fastened it around Switch's wings and body, tying him firmly in place over the granbull's back.

"All right," said Macro. "That should at least get him on board the ship. You go first, just in case anything disastrous happens."

He fired another glance at the town as Anchor mounted the ladder, leaving Macro to grab the bottom two rungs. Matrix zipped up ahead of them, and once he was inside the hatch the ladder began to ascend.

"I'm really sorry," Switch gasped out.

"Don't worry about it," said Anchor. "It's only a scratch."

Macro snorted at the granbull's response, his eyes going to the ground as he followed several drips of crimson blood. 'Scratch' his

left foot.

…

Annie stared up at the slatted ceiling, clutching the duvet over her chest. She had no recollection of falling asleep in such a strange room. It smelled damp and a little of feces. She glanced under the cover. Nope, she was good. The smell must have been coming from the bathroom. Oddly enough, she knew where that was, but the bedroom was rather unfamiliar.

Things slowly came back to her as she perched on the edge of the bed, stretching her arms until her shoulders and back popped. This wasn't a cell. It was a house that belonged to some weird pokemon. Ones that didn't want to fill her up with tablets so she'd stop rambling about the colour of the walls.

Tablets!

Her eyes flew to the blue container perched on a dresser, right beside a glass of yellow-tinted water. The water was rather warm and had a funny earthy smell to it. Not exactly palatable, but it would do. Her plan began to come back to her. Time travel. Time archeops. Wait until the effects of the tablets wore off before taking another one, and hope she'd secure the feathered form of the exotic reptile bird thing.

She tapped her foot in irritation and looked over at the window. The pair of yellowed curtains billowed as wind whipped through the cracked windows. Daylight. It was totally daylight. So why was nothing happening?

There was a soft rap at the door, followed by it moving inward with an audible, complaining creak. A rather gentle face peered in. Purple and white, with thick fur around her jaws. She stood almost bipedal as she held the doorknob in one large paw. A skuntank. Web. That was it.

"You're awake," she said. "That's good, I was a little worried you might still be dozing. Are you free?"

Annie looked from the skuntank to the pill bottle and back. With a shrug, she stood up and carried the bottle and glass of tepid 'water' with her as she followed Web down the creaking stairs.

"It was touch and go most of the night," said Web. "Up until around three AM when the little guy finally opened his eyes. Then things were much easier."

Annie inclined her head on one side as she tried to absorb the skunk pokemon's words. Her answer came in the form of a bucket beside the kitchen sink. Trojan - she recognized the scrafty - tucked into what appeared to be sandwich with some berry filling. His eyes went from the bucket to Annie and he frowned.

"You snore," he scoffed. "Really loud, n'all. Kept me up for hours."

It was then that Annie noted the dark rings under his eyes. Not exactly something she wasn't accustomed to, herself. She shrugged off the scrafty and went over to the bucket. Peering up at her from beneath the off-colour water were the wide, slightly bugged eyes of a goldeen. His lips curled up into a smile and he flicked his tail, splashing water spray over the edge of the bucket.

"Hi!" he said. "You're the one who helped me yesterday!"

"Yesterday." Annie looked up at the ceiling and raised a finger to her chin. "Yes. You're that little fish."

"Thanks to you, I'm healing! My name's Zip! What's yours?"

Annie stood up straight and stared down at him for a moment longer. The stitching on his side certainly looked like small zips.

"It's Annie," she said. "At least… I think it is."

"You think?" He chuckled.

"It's been a long time. I've probably forgotten and warped it over the years." Pause. "Or made it up entirely."

Trojan took a huge bite out of his sandwich. "You're not entirely sane, are you?"

Annie turned to Web and nodded at the bucket. "He needs to be in the river like a normal fish. Where is it?"

Web blinked a few times and eyed the bucket warily. "The river… would not be safe for him right now. In his state there's no way he could escape the nets set for water dwellers."

"Nets?"

"Yes. Pokemon catch and eat them." She looked up at Annie, her eyes wide with confusion. "Have you forgotten what we talked about last night?"

"Maybe." Annie paused and looked over the skuntank's shoulder. "So he can't go back in the river. That means you have a fish in your kitchen."

Web laughed and shook her head. "I really don't mind. And I'm sure both Waveform and Trojan are okay with it, too."

Trojan snorted. "Kinda in the way, but whatever."

A strange feeling began to surge through Annie's body, making her fingers tingle. She clenched them tightly and glanced around the room with quick movements, like she was trying to track a yanma.

"Well. I'll leave him in your hands then."

Her limbs exploded with yellow feathers and the room suddenly grew larger. She hit the floor with a yelp. Wait… no, that was Web's yelp. The skuntank fell back from her, and her face grew so pale it made her nose look white. Trojan even dropped his sandwich.

Annie looked down at her feathered body and leapt to her feet with a cheer.

"They wore off! The pills wore off!"

She scrambled up to the table and scooped up the tablet bottle. Her scaly claws fumbled with the container until she managed to prise the child-locked lid free. Two tablets were all she needed. Two to fasten her in the form of an archeops, provided she didn't change last minute and stick to the non-time-traveling human form.

She grimaced slightly at the taste of the tepid water, but once the tablets were washed down she slammed the glass back onto the table top with a satisfied sigh. Then she spread her wings and looked down at herself, waiting.

One.

Two.

Nothing.

She was still an archeops.

A grin spread across her face, flashing two rows of sharp teeth.

"Space!" she shouted. "I need space!"

She scrambled from the kitchen on all fours, her claws skittering over the wooden floor. The stairs were nothing in her archeops form. She scrambled up them like a lizard until she reached her room.

Space. There was ample enough of that in the sparse bedroom.

"Now what was I doing," she asked herself slowly, "when I time traveled?"

It was a good question. She'd been doing a lot of things. Talking to herself, answering questions that had come up in her mind. Arguing

with herself when her mind told her the answers were wrong. Discussing the wall colour. White was such an abrasive colour, and it was everywhere in that cell. Eating. Yes, she'd had some berries.

Leaping.

That was what she'd been doing.

Whenever she took on that bird's form, she liked to see if she could fly. She'd been leaping, her form changing intermittently in the process. The archeops could leap higher than her human form. So it must have been that. She'd been an archeops, leaping around until she'd leapt so high she'd managed to change time lines. That must have been it!

So she leapt.

Back and forth in the bedroom, flapping her undeveloped wings and gaining some level of altitude. Her head struck the dangling light fitting, and it swayed back and forth dangerously. She didn't care. She needed to be higher.

She stopped and looked over at the window. The roof. Maybe she should try the roof.

She scurried to the window, prising it open against its stiff latch. It barely moved an inch.

"Stupid window!" she snapped. "Let me out!"

"Annie!"

She froze and turned her head to look over her shoulder. Web stood in the doorway, her face twisted with concern. Trojan stood behind her, chewing on his sandwich with a look of amusement.

"What are you doing?" Web asked softly.

"Trying to time travel," Annie said, as though it was the most obvious thing ever. "It's how I got here, right? I jumped around and here I am."

"I don't think it's that simple," said the skuntank. "Come down from the window before you hurt yourself."

"No! I need to get higher! I leapt super high before I got here!"

"Leave her." Waveform appeared behind Web, and Trojan stood aside wearing a disgruntled expression on his face. "If she wants to leap higher, then let her. It might be rather enlightening for her."

Web looked up at the decidueye, and her eyes widened as realization fell on her. With a nod, she looked back at the archeops.

"Fine. You take her to the roof the safe way," said Web. "I don't want her falling out of the window or cutting herself on glass. We've had enough casualties under this roof to last a lifetime."

"I'd hardly say one fish is gonna last you a lifetime." Annie hopped from the bed and turned to Waveform. "So you're taking me to the roof?"

The decidueye appeared rather nervous, but he nodded regardless.

"How are your wings?" he asked. "Can you fly?"

"Kinda. I more hop and flap around."

"Like a hatchling." He reached down and placed his wing feathers over her shoulders. "Come on. I'll carry you if I have to."

"This I've got to see," said Trojan.

Annie trotted after Waveform, following him down the stairs. He went straight out of the door, grabbing his quiver on the way. She thought she heard Web tut.

The decidueye stopped just outside the house and looked up at the roof.

"Follow me," he said.

In one graceful bound, he spread his wings and lifted himself towards the roof. Not a single sound came from his wings. Deadly silent. It almost gave Annie chills.

She shook out her own feathers and leapt after him, flapping her wings constantly to try and stay airborne. She didn't even make it to the second story window before she crashed back down to the ground, knocking the wind out of herself with the impact.

"Try again!" Waveform called.

She shook her head sharply and tried once more, this time reaching the window before crashing back down like a sack of spuds.

Before she could stand back up, a set of talons dug into her back and she let out a surprised yelp as she was lifted from the ground. Waveform carried her effortlessly up to the roof and let her go on the slippery tiles. She had to dig her claws into them to stop herself from sliding off.

He towered over her, locking her in a vermilion stare. It wasn't aggressive, impatient or threatening yet somehow she found it oddly intimidating.

"Try here," he said. "There's no ceiling blocking your reach of the sky."

Annie pushed herself up and looked up at the clouds. Her entire body was trembling with the effort of holding herself in place. There was no saying she wouldn't slip to her death. But if she didn't try, she'd never get back.

And if she could do this, she could go anywhere.

She relaxed her claws and, with her back legs, sprang straight up. Her wings were nowhere near as developed as Waveform's, but she beat them as hard as she could, sending herself over his head and landing in a sprawl behind him. Her claws slipped over the tiles and she clawed at them until she managed to scramble back onto the peak. Then, another leap, sending her back over his head to the other side.

All the while, he watched her, turning his head almost one-eighty as she leapt back and forth. Every time she slipped, he tensed up and raised his wings ever so slightly.

After her seventh attempt, she landed behind him, gasping for breath.

"What am I doing wrong?" she asked herself. "I'm a Time Archeops!"

"You're not a 'Time Archeops'." He reached down and tugged her to her feet, turning her with both wings to face him. "I think we've proved that, don't you?"

She blinked at him, meeting his somewhat intimidating vermilion eyes.

"Then explain how I got here," she said.

"You said you were leaping," he said. "What else happened?"

"I got sucked through a smoky mist," she said. "Then someone took me to the mayor."

"Who?"

She shrugged. "I don't really remember. Some creepy guy and something that looked like an onion."

He stared at her, unblinking, for an uncomfortably long time.

"Did you ever stop to think," he said slowly, "that this 'creepy guy' and 'onion' might have had something to do with it?"

Huh.

She glanced away at the vast array of rooftops.

"Because," he said, "as much as I struggle to believe it, there's drawings of a pokemon that looks like an onion that is said to be able to travel through time."

She looked down at herself then met his eyes again. "I do not look like an onion!"

"Not you!" He took a deep breath and shook his head. "It's some pokemon called Celebi."

"Huh." She raised a claw to her chin and looked up at the yellow sky. "Then if I want to get back, I need to get my claws on this onion."

"I'd say so."

"Waveform, right?" She met his eyes again and set her jaw. "You gonna help me?"

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 26

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Twenty Six

Fortunately, Cookie knew a thing or two about first aid. The brown slurpuff sat with his tongue poked between his lips as he fastened the splints in place around Switch's wing. The talonflame grimaced, but at least his screaming and groaning had come to an end.

Macro sat back in his seat, having turned it all the way around to observe Cookie's first aid skills. No one would assume a chef would have a clue about binding bones, but with all the accidents he'd inflicted on himself it wasn't much of a surprise.

Anchor had retired to his room for a lie down. Cookie's first priority had been to stitch up the deeper of the two gashes. The second was merely a scratch in comparison. He didn't think any damage had been done to Anchor's internal organs, and neither did Anchor. But the pain killers had wiped him out and he'd fallen asleep before his head even hit the pillow.

Macro rubbed the bridge of his nose and stifled a groan, not for the first time. Things had taken a major whack, putting every one of his plans on hold. At least Switch had seen some of Raster Town to get an idea of how things worked in System. Now, Macro would have to take the bull by the horns and steer Wildcard Gamma himself if they were to have any chance of reaching Cyan Island in the next twenty-four hours.

"All done!" Cookie released Switch's wing and stood up, beating his paws together. "Don't go bumping it, okay?"

Switch eyed his wing cautiously and tried to fold it at his side. His face twisted with pain and instead he held it at a funny angle at his

side, not quite completely tucked in place.

"Thank you," he said, forcing a smile.

Cookie beamed. "No problem! I'll get right on making some sitrus berry waffles! That should help us all feel better, right?"

With that, he waddled from the cockpit.

Switch tentatively flexed his wing and turned to look at Macro. Macro merely turned back to the dashboard, scanning his eyes over the complex controls.

"That thing was barely alive, was it?" Switch asked.

Macro looked over his shoulder with a start. "Huh?"

"The steelix," said Switch. "It was barely alive."

"It seemed pretty alive to me," said Macro as he turned back to the controls. "But I don't know for how much longer."

"It didn't even have teeth. It's mouth was riddled with something else, instead." Switch paused. "Is that was the toxic air does? Or is there some disease I'm not aware of?"

"It's the air all right," said Macro. "It rots the air ways, often resulting in tumors. That steelix were riddled with them."

"Yet it still attacked you?"

"Yeah. Either it wanted to die, or it wanted the money from turning me in, maybe hoping it could afford the medical treatment to remove those tumors. Maybe even buy some bionic lungs."

"Do they even exist?" Switch sounded mildly amused.

"Oh, there's bionic everything," said Macro with some disgust. "You name it, they've made it. Some wealthier types even shell out to

have their organs or skeletons replaced with bionic versions."

"I don't see the point," said Switch. "I mean, medically, sure, it makes sense. But pokemon just buy modifications?"

"Yup."

"What if they have to evolve?"

"They can't," said Macro. "End of story. Need to use an everstone or they'd die a horrible death in the process."

Switch tutted and shifted uneasily. "Why? I just don't get it."

"Fashion. Plus, if you lived in the rough areas you'd find loads of pokemon with bionic body parts. A lot of them are cowboy jobs as well. Pokemon take risks if they fear for survival. Weaker, unevolved sorts desire a quick fix to boost their strengths at the cost of their evolution. Worm is one of them. You might have seen him in Pulse City. He was young and foolish at the time. No idea what he's had done, he's never said, but he probably regrets the decision." He paused. "That might be why he drinks so much."

Switch shuddered and rose to his feet. "I'm gonna get to bed and sleep this pain off. Thanks for the nightmares."

Macro chuckled dryly and watched the talonflame leave the room. It was just him now. Matrix was still in the kitchen 'having a snack'. Macro was beginning to assume it was a three course meal. As for DL, he guessed she was helping out Cookie. He sighed and turned back to the controls. Still daylight, and they were wasting it drifting aimlessly in the air miles above Raster Town.

He shook his head and growled under his breath. "Where do I even begin?"

…

Annie sat at the kitchen table, sipping at a bowl of berry soup. It was strangely bitter, and the bread to go with it was stale. But she was hungry.

Everyone else was silent, slowly tucking into their own meals. Web claimed she wasn't the best chef, but Annie felt it impolite to agree. Instead, she said nothing. If there was one thing she remembered from her childhood, it was her mother telling her 'if you have nothing nice to say, then say nothing.' It had taken her several months to realise she didn't mean literally say 'nothing'.

The goldeen poked his head out of his bucket and fixed them all with a smile.

"Do you have any sitrus berries left?" he asked. "I'm really hungry."

"You're gonna have to ration that appetite, Zip," said Trojan. "We barely have enough berries for dinner."

Annie let her bowl clatter to the table. "Then we have to get more!"

"With what money?" Trojan scoffed. "I've been out of work for a month now, since my bar closed down. And as for him," he nudged Waveform with an elbow, causing him to spill soup down his feathers, "he ain't exactly turning up with pockets full either."

"Space pirates don't just drop out of the sky, you know," said the decidueye.

"Space pirates?" Annie raised an eyebrow.

"Yes," said Web. "Rebels of the skies. They steal, cheat, raid, even take lives."

"They murder?"

Web flinched. "That's a harsh way of wording it. They're reckless. Accidents happen."

"Webber should know about that," said Trojan. "She used to be one"

Annie looked from Web to the other two pokemon, then counted things off on her claws. She looked back up with a start, turning her head back and forth between the skuntank and decidueye.

"Waitaminute," she said.

"We have a weird relationship," said Trojan before she could even ask her question.

"We all struggle to make rent," said Web. "I'm no longer an active pirate. Haven't been in two years. There's a truce between us in exchange for helping one another out."

Annie pointed a claw between Web and Waveform. "So I won't have to pull you two apart, then?"

Web chuckled but Waveform picked up his bowl and closed his eyes.

"Her help is worth far more than the five hundred credits I'd get for turning her in," he said.

Trojan grunted and folded his arms. "I'd saw my own leg off for five hundred credits. But I ain't one to break a truce."

Annie let her feathered limbs fall onto the table on either side of her bowl. "So life's hard then?"

"You could say that," said Web.

"I blame Socket," Trojan scoffed. "Won't help out anyone who can't afford it. That's why the outskirts have virtually turned to sludge."

"Sludge, eh?" Annie scratched her chin. "Socket's the mayor, right?"

"Yeh," said Trojan. "The one you slapped."

"Whoa!" Zip almost fell out of his bucket. "You slapped her?!"

"Oh, yeh, the grabby one." Annie looked up at the ceiling in thought. "Then why don't you just get a new mayor?"

"It ain't as easy as that," said Trojan.

"One would have to be voted in," said Web. "And no one is brave enough to confront her."

"All who have tried died trying," said Waveform somewhat unemotionally.

"Hmm." Annie pursed her lips. "Then we should try en-mass."

Web and Trojan sat up bolt upright, the former with such force her chair teetered dangerously backward and she flailed her forelegs to right herself. Waveform's bowl clattered to the floor, sloshing the remains of his soup all over the table and his feathers.

"We?!" Trojan spat. "You're saying we should do something?!"

Annie shrugged. "You want to see an end to this struggle, right? Get a new mayor? I can offer to help you, since I'm not going anywhere anytime soon. At least not until I get my Time Onion."

"Okay." Trojan turned in his seat and waved a paw at her. "Firstly, I'd really like to know why you suddenly believe there's a Time Onion. But more importantly, what the jack are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting a rebellion."

Web's jaw dropped, while Trojan merely stared at her. She could see Waveform beginning to tremble over his shoulder. Was he cold? She shrugged it off and picked up her bowl to swig more of her soup.

"Okay, Annie." Web waved her paws as though trying to calm down a tantruming child. "You need to think about what you're saying here. A rebellion would be… Well, it would be…"

Annie looked up and smiled. "Awesome?"

"Not… quite the word I was looking for," said the skuntank.

"Look, you said space pirates are rebels of the skies, right?" said Annie. "And from what I've gathered, pirates are a problem. Like rattatas back in my world. Too many of them, so humans try to execute them. Like Waveform is doing with space pirates."

"I don't execute them," said Waveform. "I turn them in."

"That, to me, says there's a lot of them." Annie folded her wings. "So. We'd have a lot of potential pirates to get behind us. Overwhelm the mayor."

Everyone fell silent, staring at her slack-jawed. All except Zip. He placed his flippers on the edge of his bucket and pushed himself up so he could meet her eye.

"I can help, too," he said. "I… because of Socket's silly law about eating us, I lost my mum and all my brothers and sisters. My dad was killed long before we even hatched. I never met him. I… I want to see an end to all this!"

He looked away from her to meet everyone else's gaze, his huge eyes pleading.

Web placed her face in her paw and sighed.

"You know what you're askin', right?" Trojan looked down at Annie. "You're suggesting we start a war."

"I'm suggesting we start a rebellion." Annie folded her wings again and locked her green eyes on his. "'Rebellion' sounds cooler."

Waveform gave Trojan a sideways glance. "She's right. It does sound cooler."

Trojan, just like Web, placed his face in his paw and sighed.

"Now, if we're gonna recruit space pirates," said Annie, "we need to think like space pirates. How do space pirates think?"

This question was directed at Web. The skuntank ran a paw through the fur between her ears and glanced away.

"How do they think? Wow that's a tough one. Well…" She looked thoughtful. "They steal and cheat, like I said. And given the name, they fly around in ships."

"Like boat ships?" Annie asked.

"No, not quite. But in tribute to their traditional sea-faring ways before they took to the skies, the ships are all marine themed. A majority of them being designed after fish pokemon."

"Like me!" Zip puffed out his chest.

Annie leant her head on her wing claws and stared at Zip. "No offense, little fish, but I don't really want a… girly looking ship."

The goldeen pouted his bottom lip.

"It needs to be more imposing." Annie sat back in her chair and turned her attention to the ceiling again. "Now what kind of marine pokemon would we use?"

"Well, if you want imposing," said Trojan, "I'd suggest a sharpedo. Most imposing pokemon in the sea."

"Or a huntail," said Waveform.

"No, no! Kyogre!" Zip thrashed with excitement, spilling water onto the tiles.

"Kyogre don't exist!" Trojan snapped.

Annie pointed a claw and her eyes widened. "Pyukumuku!"

Everyone went slack-jawed again.

"What's imposing about a pyukumuku?" Trojan scoffed. "You poke them and they spit!"

"Yes! Spit like a rebel!" Annie laughed.

"Come on, if you wanna do this, be serious!"

"I am being serious!" Annie rammed her claws onto the table top. "We are having a ship designed to look like a pyukumuku! And y'all will like it!"

Trojan crossed his arms and sulked.

"Now, how do we make it?" Annie asked. "I guess ourselves, right?"

"You need the materials," said Web. "Which are expensive, and we don't have any scrap metal lying around."

"You said pirates steal, though, right? So we'll just have to get some."

"Don't go thieving," said Waveform. "I'll get the metal."

The decidueye pushed his bowl away and stood up from the table, marching silently from the room.

"He's gonna go turn in some pirates," said Trojan with a chuckle. "Oh, the irony."

"I never said we were space pirates," said Annie. "We're merely masquerading. You a good artist?"

He eyed her with a sideways glance and frowned. "I throw graffiti up around Spool City. So yeh, I'd say so."

"And you can build things?"

"I've dabbled with engines here and there." The scrafty tried his best to not look smug.

"Good. Design me my pyukumuku ship and I'll make you my chief engineer."

Trojan stood up so violently his chair fell backwards with a clatter and skittered across the floor. He stuffed his paws into his baggy trouser-like fur and stomped from the kitchen muttering something about pyukumuku under his breath.

Annie beamed and struck the table with both paws. "Meeting adjourned!"

Web stood up straight beside the bucket, holding a wet towel in her paws. Zip was diving up and down, splashing yet more water onto the floor with cries of 'yay! Rebellion!'

The skuntank shook her head sadly. "I don't know about this, Annie."

Annie climbed from her seat, not taking her eyes off the larger pokemon.

"You want this mayor gone, right?" she asked.

Web rung the towel absently, draining the water back onto the tiles. "I think we all do."

"Well then. Let's ride this ship to freedom and clean air."

With that, she strutted from the room to find something a pirate might wear. A space pirate wouldn't look the part in a white hospital robe.

…

It had taken Macro the whole of an hour to figure out how to firstly get Wildcard Gamma moving, and also how to keep it moving in a straight line. It didn't help that Anchor's chair was significantly lower down than his own, and he'd had to crank it up to its full height and

stand on it in order to reach the controls. He muttered under his breath about size discrimination then fell onto his bottom, running his paw over his face. At least it was moving now, hopefully in the right direction.

There was absolutely no way he was going to try and figure out the navigation system, too. He wasn't exactly oblivious when it came to computers, or maps, but he'd had enough for one day. It was moving in the vague direction of Cyan City. He'd worry more about getting it right on target later. Right now, he was emotionally and mentally exhausted.

With the hum of the engine as his only company, he found all those niggling thoughts clearing from his mind. Humans, time pockets, BackDoor, DL… It was like white noise, blocking out everything else and replacing it with peace. He began to feel himself being lulled to sleep. He shuffled down in the over-sized seat and closed his eyes, letting the dull drone drag him into a light slumber.

It was a seemingly uneventful dream that followed. Wildcard Gamma was flying through System Sky, but there was nothing there. No cities. No other ships. Just blackness. Despite the lack of anything, it all felt tranquil.

They flew along for what felt like hours, just cruising through the night sky. Random banter erupted between Anchor and Matrix, but it was nothing out of the ordinary. He was aware of Switch dozing behind them, and DL pressing up against his side, but nothing bothered him. Everything was just… ordinary.

Then something flickered in the distance like a star. Macro's eyes flew to it, realising there had been no stars at all up until that point. Just one light, flickering in the darkness.

Then it grew, blinding him and sending him off his chair onto the floor.

His eyes flew open, and he found himself lying on the cockpit floor, his fur covered in a slick sweat. Yet that strange dazzling light remained on his vision, slowly fading out until it left a small dazzle spot that looked like the combination of a flower and a sun, its rays extending off it and alternating in size, narrowing towards the end like petals.

He rubbed his eyes to remove the lingering effects and pushed himself back to his feet.

What on earth was that? It had been like any other mellow dream up until that point. His shoulder hurt where he'd landed on it, and it pulsed as he strained to pull himself back into the driver's seat. Maybe he should have lowered it first.

Forget it. He was gonna take his own comfortable seat, or go to bed. One or the other.

As he looked out of the window, he realised it was still daylight. A quick check of his computer told him it was growing closer to dinner time. He'd only been asleep a few minutes.

That didn't make sense.

He rubbed at his eyes again and stared out of the window, shielding them from the brightness as the sun reflected off the surface of the fluffy white clouds.

Despite how much he tried to rub it away, he could still see that sun-like spot.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 27

Chapter Twenty Seven

Macro hadn't slept again since that dream. He'd been wide awake, even after the sun had set. The dazzling light in his eyes had subsided, although it had taken a while. System Sky was now as dark as it always was at night, dotted with twinkling stars that he couldn't help but obsess over.

It was just a dream. He knew it was just a dream. Yet every time a star caught his eye, he stared at it, nearly daring it to flash and dazzle him.

Just a dream.

One of the bedroom doors opened and he leapt in his seat, turning his head and straining his ears. Heavy footsteps. Anchor. Yet Macro's fur was still on end.

The granbull yawned and strode into the cockpit, and his eyes opened wide when they fell on the mawile.

"Cap'n?" Anchor seemed to be questioning whether or not he was still asleep.

"Yeh, it's me." Macro turned and leant back in his chair. "I've been watching the cockpit. No sense in risking us crashing into a city."

"You could always have set it on auto," said Anchor. "Circle somewhere inconspicuously for a while, you know?"

"I don't know how to set that up," said Macro. "And Matrix had gone to bed before I could even think to ask him."

"Coulda woke me, I'd have done it real quick."

Macro waved a paw. "That was out of the question."

"Anyway. You should get some sleep." Anchor narrowed his eyes at him. "Otherwise you'll be nodding off trying to fight off soldiers in Cyan City."

That was a very good point.

Macro slid from his seat, mumbling a thanks to the granbull before marching from the room. He paused in the doorway and looked back over his shoulder.

"How're your stitches?" The words surprised him as they left his mouth.

Anchor gave a belly laugh and shook his head. "I'm fine, Cap'n. I'll be by your side tomorrow, fists 'n' all."

Macro smiled and chuckled nervously before leaving the cockpit. He hadn't even been asking that. For some reason, he'd merely felt the urge to check up on his first in command… without even thinking.

Was he turning paranoid?

He ran a paw over his scar and paused by the rest room. Maybe a shower was what he needed to clear his head.

Tugging off his belt, he strolled into the room and tossed it aside on the unit. Lavender scented water cascaded down, soaking into his fur, and he realised all too late he'd forgotten to remove his scarf. He cursed silently under his breath and wrenched the now-sodden black scarf from his shoulders and launched it across the room.

What had got into his head?

Once the shower was off, he collected his discarded garment under one arm and his belt under the other, and made his way to his room. Hopefully he'd remember which one it was.

Thankfully he did.

Once the scarf was hanging over the foot of his bed frame, he climbed under the sheets and tried to summon sleep.

Unfortunately, it didn't come. His attempt was wrought with racing thoughts and much tossing and turning. After that dream, nothing felt normal. Things felt… different… and he couldn't place what had changed.

Paranoia didn't even seem an appropriate word to use.

The moment daylight leaked from his window, he abandoned all efforts to sleep and dragged himself out of bed.

His scarf was still soggy, and had even left a nice pool of lavender scented water on his tiled floor. He opened his draw to search for a spare and let out a groan. The only one left was worn and tattered. His first one, if he remembered correctly, and it smelled of must.

He looked over at the chair, still sporting the neatly-folded package Switch had given him. Black. With blue squares at either end, drifting away from their black and blue brick-like formation to meet in the middle as though they were being pulled apart by some invisible force.

Two colours wasn't that bad.

He let out a defeated sigh and grabbed the new scarf, tossing it over his shoulders like he always did. It was a little longer than his chosen scarves, but nevertheless, it kept his tiny form neatly disguised.

He almost threw himself from his room, and stomped his way towards the cockpit. Anchor raised an eyebrow at him and fixed him with a look of concern.

"Wow, Cap'n. You're up early."

"Couldn't sleep." Macro climbed into his seat and fastened the seatbelt over his waist.

Anchor shook his head slowly and turned back to his controls. "Well, I sure hope you're fit for battle. 'Cos we're almost at Cyan City."

"I'll be fine." Macro brushed back a lock of long black fur from his eyes and sighed. "How long?"

"About an hour. Enough time to grab a quick breakfast, unless you wanna hover over the city for a while. Give us time to prepare."

"No. In and out." Macro leant back in his seat and disguised hugging himself as 'folding his arms.'

"You all right, Cap'n?"

Dang. It hadn't fooled Anchor in the slightest. Macro sighed again and shook his head.

"I'm fine. Let's just get this over with, okay?"

"Really, Cap'n-"

"I said I'm fine!" He flashed his canines at the granbull.

Anchor shook his head and looked back out of the window. "If you say so."

Macro couldn't take much more. He unfastened his seatbelt and dropped from his seat, aggravating his sore shoulder. He'd completely forgotten about that.

The kitchen was filled with inviting smells and Cookie looked up with a start when he entered. He clutched a ladle in one paw, hovering it over a pan as it dripped melted chocolate back into it. Macro's stomach rumbled and he grabbed his usual seat at the table.

"It'll be a while yet," said Cookie. "You're up mad early!"

"Just serve me whatever's ready first," said Macro, slumping over the table with his head in one paw.

"Okie dokie!" Cookie began to spoon the chocolate sauce into a bowl.

Macro watched curiously. Was this some kind of new recipe, or a joke at his statement? He couldn't tell.

The bowl was popped down before him, complete with a side of cookies.

The slurpuff beamed. "Chocolate dip with cookies! Bit of an improv, but… the sauce was ready first, so…"

Macro wasn't going to complain. He was hungry and the combination sounded oddly tempting. He picked up one cookie - complete with its own chocolate chips - and dipped it into the steaming chocolate. One bite and he practically swooned.

Cookie let out a sigh of relief. "I was really worried you were gonna throw it back at me!"

Macro chuckled and waved the slurpuff away. "Get back to your cooking, all's good here."

Cookie waddled back to his stove and continued working away, stirring at something Macro couldn't identify from the table.

As he moved onto his second cookie, the door opened and DL looked around, her nose twitching at the different smells. Her eyes fell on Macro and his 'breakfast' and she raised an eyebrow.

"That's an odd combination," she said. "Is it one of Cookie's latest creations?"

"It is now!" the slurpuff quipped.

DL pulled up a seat and waved at the chef. "I'd like some too, please."

"Coming right up!"

Macro stared at DL, his chocolate-coated cookie hovering mere millimeters from his lips. His appetite had been shot in the gut, replaced by some fluttery feeling he really didn't want. He grabbed his bowl and plate of cookies, and headed straight out of the kitchen.

"Wait! Where are you going?" DL asked.

"I'll eat this in the cockpit," he said. "You stay right there and enjoy your breakfast."

He didn't see the pachirisu's reaction. He didn't want to. He just wanted to put as much distance between DL and himself as possible.

And if that meant spilling chocolate all over the ship's controls, so be it. He'd explain to Anchor later.

…

Cyan City floated miles below them, its vibrant lakes reflecting the blue of the sky. The lakes were by no means natural, but Cyan City tried to make them look as if they were. Surrounded with stone, they gave the pokemon-made structures a natural feel, and that was also aided by the berry bushes that grew in abundance, maintained by the clean air pumped up and filtered through from System Ground. Wild trees didn't exist. Everything was cultivated, grown only in areas that had clean air and the pokemon willing to farm them.

As Macro dropped down on the neon ladder, the pokemon below came into view. Marill and azurill gathered around the lakes, harvesting berries into the backs of small trucks. Squirtle played in the lake along with froakie and mudkip. Totodile and croconaw basked on the rugged rocks.

Macro diverted his gaze to the horizon. Tall skyscrapers. A common sight. Above them rotated tall, white windmills, generating the city's electricity via the air. Fortunately they generated more than the air conditioning used.

His feet touched the ground, hidden away from the working and playing pokemon. Anchor landed beside him and quickly checked his wrist computer.

"Location is right nearby," he said. "It's stored on the second floor of a storehouse. Usually stores berries and food produce. Bit of an odd location if you ask me."

"Maybe Socket was desperate," said Macro.

Anchor shrugged. "Maybe she thought it would throw you. Be a good disguise."

"Or this place is the red herring." Macro scratched his scar and sighed. "Oh well, we're here now. Let's get it over with."

"What's the rush?" Anchor fell into step behind him, glancing over at the workers beyond the bushes. "You seem rather hasty today."

"I'm not hasty, I just want this job done." Macro grit his teeth together. "Then we can finally get back to a normal life."

"You're talkin' about DL?" Anchor asked. "Or Switch?"

"Switch doesn't need these memories," said Macro with some venom. "Nevertheless, I'll be glad when we've got him back home, too."

"This is all wiggin' you out, ain't it?" Anchor scratched at his stitches and his face twisted in a way that said he regretted it.

"Kind of."

"Kind of?"

"Look, I don't wanna talk about it." Macro waved him off. "Forget it. Let's focus, shall we? We're gonna end up drawing attention to ourselves."

Anchor fell silent, his heavy footsteps the only reassurance Macro had that he hadn't bailed on him. The mawile clenched his paw beside his gun and looked over at the lake. No one had spotted them. Fortunately.

"Peaceful, ain't it?" Anchor asked.

Macro looked over his shoulder. The granbull's eyes were on the lake, his paws clasped behind his head.

"You wouldn't think they were currently at war," said Anchor. "Makes one glad it's only on a small scale."

Macro nodded but his paw didn't leave his laser. If they got caught up in the water type pokemon's war, he wanted to be prepared. He flexed his claws, keeping his ears and eyes open as they moved silently towards the city's depths.

As they reached the end of their cover, he faltered, scanning the streets around the lake. It wasn't as busy as Binary City. Few places were. But he had to remind himself he was no longer safe in System Sky. His reward had spread. Anyone could turn him in now unless they were a pirate.

That reminder left a bad taste in his mouth.

Anchor's sturdy paw fell onto his back and nudged him forwards. The granbull's eyes were on a young family across the lake - a mother slowbro ushering her two children along. Even if they spotted Macro they wouldn't be able to keep up with him.

He darted from his hiding spot and paused at the corner of the road leading into the city. With his back pressed against the cold stone wall of an apartment block, he searched the road. Windows.

Doorways. Only the odd pokemon, most of them heading away from the lake towards the centre of the city. Many of them carried re-usable shopping bags.

The city centre… that would be where they'd have the hardest time, he could smell it. His paw went to his pouch and he considered strongly adding the electric laser capsule to one of his trusty lasers. Water wasn't exactly a weakness, but would it be ethical to add it? He didn't need it. He always had his grass laser to fall back on if need be.

He cursed under his breath, drawing Anchor's attention. Macro scratched his neck beneath his scarf. He'd never considered ethics before. Usually if he had a new laser capsule he'd use it, no questions asked. Or sell it.

Maybe he should sell it.

Flicking his right laser to grass, he marched down the road, keeping his eyes ahead but his ears open to his surroundings. The quicker they got to the facility the faster they could get the memory disk and leave.

Childlike laughter reached his ears, accompanied by the irregular hollow thud of a ball bouncing off walls. He glanced down a wide alley, spotted the culprits. A pair of oshawott twins chasing after an orange ball designed to look like a giant sitrus berry. Keeping an air of nonchalance, he crossed the road and put the giggling children behind him.

Then a sweet smell reached his nostrils.

His nose twitched and he raised his head to follow the smell. It was oddly irresistible, yet he couldn't place it. Every building along the road was an apartment block. No bakeries in sight. No restaurants. His only assumption was that it was coming from a window or air vent. He tried to ignore it, but his nose kept going back to the air and his head turned almost involuntarily.

Anchor was in no better state. He'd turned a full one-eighty and stared back towards the alleyway.

"We should have packed snacks," said Macro.

"It ain't food, Cap'n."

Macro licked his watering lips and returned to the granbull's side. "What is it then?"

"You know when Cookie is in a real bad mood and starts to sweat?"

It wasn't the most attractive image, but Macro nodded anyway.

"Well, it's like that," said Anchor.

"So someone's baking pokepuffs. Let's get a move on."

It was easier said than done. All Macro wanted to do was retrace his steps to find the source of that smell.

"It ain't pokepuffs," said Anchor. "Like I said, it ain't food."

Macro looked up at him with a start. He hadn't noticed earlier, but Anchor wasn't all that interested in the smell itself. It hadn't pulled him in like it had Macro. Anchor's brow was furrowed as he stared back at the alleyway. He wanted to know what was causing it. No… he knew.

It was blindingly obvious now.

Macro's paw shot to his laser and he pushed past the granbull.

"Wait, Cap'n." Anchor grabbed his shoulder. "I'll go help the kids. You go and get that disk."

Macro looked from the alley to Anchor, then towards the city. A space pirate looks out for number one. He wasn't going to get caught

up in the water pokemon's war. Besides, what would a grass type want with a pair of oshawott barely out of their eggs?

Yet he refused to relinquish his laser.

Anchor met his eyes and his jaw set in place. "Look. I know it ain't what we usually do, but I can't ignore kids in trouble, Cap'n. And I know-"

"We don't look out for others," Macro said, emotionless. "It only comes back to bite you in the ass."

His eyes drifted again to the alley. To the source of that smell. Then he rolled his eyes and struck Anchor in the hip with his laser.

"Come on," he said.

If he'd looked away fast enough he'd have missed the look of surprise that flashed across the granbull's eyes. The larger pokemon followed him closely back towards the alley, keeping up with Macro's brisk trot.

No more laughing. No more bouncing ball. Instead, the sitrus-like sphere lay motionless in the middle of the road. The scene was like something from a horror movie. As he stood staring at it, their laughter echoed in his head and sent shivers down his spine.

Whoever had taken them had either been incredibly stealthy, or invisible.

Then he realised that smell had gone. His spine stiffened and he looked up, fixing wide eyes on the back of the alley.

That smell had been a lure, like it had almost lured him in. Yet it had had little to no effect on Anchor. Targeted. The kids were targeted.

He grit his teeth together, letting out a low growl, and cocked his laser beside his head.

It was like the Analogue Isles all over again. A lone kid drawn in by an irresistible signal. A cry for help that had ended three lives and almost claimed two children.

Almost claimed his own.

He shoved the thought aside and focused on following the non-existent trail through the alley, being careful not to nudge the ball. Any sound would be detrimental, and he needed complete silence if he was going to pinpoint the kids' invisible abductor.

Anchor snuffled and lifted his head.

"Keep going," he whispered.

"You can smell it?" Macro replied.

Anchor nodded. "Trail's faint, but it's there."

Macro gave a curt nod and pressed on, daring not to breathe. The end of the alley seemed oddly ominous, when just moments before it had been a place of fun. He half expected to see blood on the walls or hear a whimper coming from a trash can.

"Giga! Gigi!"

Macro leapt out of his skin, spinning on the spot to aim his gun towards the alleyway mouth. A dewott stood with her back to them, shouting into the streets. Great. The mother. He grimaced. Any chance they had of catching the culprit had been shot in the foot.

Anchor groaned and slammed a paw into his head.

"You deal with it," Macro spat. "I'm gonna find those kids."

Anchor pointed a thick claw at the dewott and his eyes widened. "You want me to go and talk to her?"

"Yeh. Use your words." Macro turned his back on him and crept further into the alley.

"Okay." Anchor was hesitant and he cleared his throat. "I'll think of something to say. Shout if you need me."

"You come straight back," Macro hissed. "I ain't doin' this alone."

…

The young dewott looked close to tears, her paw clasped at her mouth as her black eyes searched the empty road. Anchor had no idea what to say to her. He moved slowly, keeping one paw raised as he reached her.

"Excuse me, ma'am."

The dewott span on the spot and her eyes bulged. Clearly she wasn't expecting to see a fairy type in Cyan City, let alone a space pirate. Her jaw dropped and her scream died in her throat as Anchor hushed her, waving his paws in a desperate bid to calm her down.

"Are you lookin' for two kids?" he blurted out.

Her mouth snapped shut and she nodded, eying him suspiciously. Then she looked past him and her cold look melted as tears filled her eyes.

"That's their ball…" Her voice choked. "Where are they?"

"That's the thing," said Anchor. "We don't know."

"We?"

Anchor waved her question away. "They were right there, playin' as we passed. Then there was this smell. Almost drew my Cap'n away until I told him it weren't food."

"A smell?" The dewott looked up at him again and blinked her tears back. There was that look of suspicion again. "What kind of smell?"

"I dunno. A sweet one?"

Her eyes widened and she pushed past him, but he reached around and grabbed her by the arm.

"Let me go!" she barked.

"You go after them, you might ruin everything! Calm down! I'm tryin' to help you here!"

"Help me?" Her eyes went from his face to his gauntlets and back. "Aren't you a pirate?"

"I admit, ma'am, I ain't exactly here with good intentions. But I ain't heartless enough to ignore a pair of missing kids." He paused, watching her eyes go from cold to tearful again. "Now. You gonna accept our help or not?"

"They're my babies…" She glanced back down the alley and her voice croaked. "I guess I don't have much choice. But who is this other mysterious pirate?"

"You know him as Hunter."

Anchor raised an eyebrow as a look of fury flashed across her eyes, but it was quickly replaced by tears again as she fidgeted her paws together, looking back down the alley.

"He… he's gone after them?" Her voice was hesitant.

"Yeh." Anchor paused and cleared his throat. "You still want his help? 'Cos I can nearly guarantee you those kids will come out of this alive."

"How? He's dangerous."

"That's exactly why. He might be crazy and take a lot of risks, but he gets the job done." Anchor folded his arms and smiled. "You want our help or not? 'Cos I need to get back in there. He's relyin' on my nose."

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 28

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D I'm having a lot of fun writing this. I'd like to point out that while I have been introducing sub-plots and new plot threads, I am trying to keep things moving smoothly. This is an epic and has its own story arcs, and might be quite long by the time I've finished it. The one Macro has recently found himself in also seemed to come out of nowhere and seriously delayed the scene I'd been wanting to write D=

I'm also a pantser, so if you notice any continuity errors I might have missed while editing, please point them out as I'll need to fix them!

Chapter Twenty Eight

Several times, Macro had considered turning around and going back. There was no sign of whatever had taken the twins, but he couldn't shake the ominous feeling that something was very wrong. He'd told himself over and over 'only look out for number one' but his feet had kept moving forwards regardless.

Not much time had passed at all when Anchor's large feet crept over the near-spotless concrete floor to join him at the end of the alley. A wall stretched across at either end, with only a narrow gap between the row of buildings. Neat little trash cans stood at the back doors to the apartment blocks, but there was almost no space for a large pokemon to squeeze between let alone a waste disposal wagon.

Anchor sniffed twice then pointed towards Macro's right. "That way."

The mawile looked over his shoulder at the granbull, then spotted the petrified dewott behind him. Macro grit his teeth together and tutted before following Anchor's indicating paw.

"You brought her with you?" he scoffed.

"Yeh," said Anchor. "Ain't gonna leave behind a terrified mum, am I?"

"So long as she can watch her own back. I'm not carrying her." Macro pressed his back against the cold stone wall and cocked his laser beside his ear.

The dewott let out a sharp gasp and her black eyes flew to his readied weapon. Macro mentally rolled his eyes and began to crawl along the wall. Cyan City. Yet another place with a weapon ban. Well he wasn't putting it away. A weapon ban didn't guarantee anyone that whoever had kidnapped the oshawott twins wouldn't be carrying any. Even if the kidnappers didn't carry a weapon, a little ban wasn't going to stop him shoving his laser right in their nose.

Keeping all eyes forward, they crept along in silence. Well… save for the dewott's erratic, rapid breathing. Every gasp grated on him and he felt his fur prickle. Surely she would give them away? He bit back the urge to snap at her and took in a steadying breath, focusing all his attention on the task at hand.

The narrow passageway spread on towards a dead end, right before it would reach the lake. The building along Macro's left ended at a low wall, and beyond that were a few berry trees, their branches reaching over the passage. Clearly in dire need of a good cutting back. Splintered twigs stuck out from the spindly branches, a hazard to the eyes for pokemon as tall as Anchor. Fresh pecha berries lay scattered along the ground, many of which had rolled up against the cold wall.

Macro stepped forwards, unconsciously ducking beneath the branches, but something snapped beneath his feet, jabbing into his pads. He lifted up one paw and beneath it was a broken twig, its leaves still as green as those attached to the branch above him.

Freshly fallen.

Why would a tree deposit a living branch? Only strong winds could whip it off, and there'd been no strong winds that day.

He trailed his eyes over the branch and reached up a paw for a closer look, but it was well out of his reach. He tapped Anchor's hip with the butt of his gun and pointed up at the branch. The granbull understood immediately and tugged it down towards the mawile effortlessly. Macro grabbed hold of it and trailed a claw over the shattered twigs. Fresh sap was still leaking out of them. It wasn't often he got a close look at a berry tree. They only grew in selected cities. But he was fairly certain it shouldn't be freely leaking sap. Further along the branch the pecha berries were crushed and fell away at the slightest brush of a paw.

"Someone's been climbing this," he said quietly.

Anchor grunted in agreement. "That smell's pretty strong here, too."

"So… that means…" The dewott wrung her paws together.

"They're probably on the other side of the wall," said Macro.

He shoved the side of his laser into his mouth and grabbed hold of the branch in both paws. Anchor gripped the branch tighter and fixed his wide eyes on the mawile.

"Hang on, Cap'n," he said. "Don't be doin' anything silly now."

Macro frowned and shook his head. He wasn't going to risk speaking and dropping his laser. He wriggled up the branch, dislodging yet more berries, until his head was over the wall. The other side was nothing more than a berry field. Lush green grass dotted with vibrant trees each sporting its own variety of berry. Amongst the trees were other plants - flowers, small trees - so many he couldn't even begin to name them. He was certainly no botanist. The wind whipped up and that sickly scent beat at him, and it took everything in his power to not let go and drop back down into the alley.

The wind carried with it more than a smell, however. Voices reached his ears and he gripped tightly at the branch and strained to hear over the rustle of leaves.

"… be done with this place before dawn."

"But what about these two?"

"Keep 'em. We'll need something to make a getaway if we get caught first."

Laughter. Sobbing. At least… he thought it was sobbing.

One of the larger plants moved and his eyes flew to it, then widened. He'd been very wrong. All the plants around the trees weren't cultivated plants at all. They were pokemon. Each and every one of them. And the one that had moved was an ivysaur. He trailed his eyes over the orchard once more. A perfect hideout for a grass type army. Torterra and grotle; a herd of bulbasaur; bayleef; tangrowth and tangela. In the trees he spotted something else moving. A carnivine. Twigs snapped and fell down into the long grass and it dropped down so it was hanging upside down to say something to one of the bayleef. Macro grit his teeth so tight over his gun it hurt. He'd have bet his ship that was what had snatched the kids.

He loosened his grip on the branch and shimmied back down it, then let go and landed in a crouch beside Anchor.

"Anything?" the granbull whispered.

"Oh yeh," said Macro. "Think I found the twins."

The dewott let out a yelp and rushed towards the wall. Macro's heart lurched into his throat and he grabbed her by the scruff, throwing her behind him. Before she could scream, his paw was over her mouth. He fixed a violet glare on her terrified eyes and spoke in a hiss.

"Fool! There's a whole army of grass pokemon on the other side of that wall! You leap over there, you'll only get all of us killed!"

Her eyes widened slowly as tears filled them. A choked sob came out of her throat, muffled by his paw.

"So are you gonna be quiet?" he asked.

She nodded.

He pulled his paw back and wiped it down his scarf. "Right. What's your name, dewott?"

"It's Lossy," she choked.

"All right, Lossy," he said. "We've got quite a predicament in our paws. We can do one of two things. One - we alert whoever's in charge here, which is my least favourite option since… you know… I'm a wanted 'mon. Two - you co-operate with me and we rescue your kids safely with a few paw-picked friends of yours. Which one will it be?"

The dewott stared at him for an uncomfortable amount of time. It didn't help matters that he was already jumpy. Both he and Anchor were straining their ears to figure out what was going on beyond the wall. Finally, the dewott nodded.

"Okay," she said. "I'll co-operate on one condition."

Macro visibly grimaced. "And what will that be?"

"You get those grass types out of Cyan City."

Macro's brows knitted together and he pulled the corner of his mouth back, flashing a sharp canine. She wasn't serious? Two pirates chasing out an army of grass type pokemon? She had to have a screw loose!

He waved his laser and turned away, marching back down the alley. "Not on your life."

"You're just going to walk away?" Her whisper came out as a squeak and Macro jerked his head around to the wall. "You can't just leave them! They're kids!"

Anchor stood over her, waving his paws to calm the seething otter down. It took everything in Macro's power to not point his gun at her. It wouldn't be remotely gentlemonly at all. Instead, he forced himself to stick it back into its holster and folded his arms.

"Look, Lossy," he spat. "What you're askin' is borderline impossible."

"Exactly. Borderline," she said.

He shrugged his paws. "I was being generous. It's absolutely impossible."

"Then we take it to the authorities," she whispered. "They'll know what to do."

"Okay, I'll make a deal with you." Macro leant against the door frame of an apartment block and kept one eye on the spot by the overhanging branch. "We'll swoop in there and rescue your tiny kids, then we'll swoop off. You can alert the authorities and deal with your leafy invasion. All right? 'Cos I ain't playin' no part in your little war."

"Except for a small rescue mission," said Anchor.

Macro nodded. "Except for a small rescue mission."

Lossy sighed and shook her head. "All right, fine. But if you helped get rid of them, then they might think-"

"That you'd ganged up with some other type and got yourself a little back up?" Macro smirked and let out a chuckle. "Then what? The grass types on System Ground rise up and retaliate against Seed City 'cos they think the fairy type has turned on them? That's how

full-blown wars start, Lossy. I ain't playin' no part in it. I'm already worth forty thousand credits. You think I really wanna crank that up?"

He kicked away from the wall and began walking back towards the mouth of the larger alley. After a few steps, he looked back at the dewott. She still stood by the low hanging branch, rubbing her paws together while staring at the wall.

Macro sighed and waved his laser at Anchor. "Grab her."

The granbull obliged, scooping up the dewott and placing a paw over her mouth to stifle her scream. He hushed her and trotted after Macro, keeping one eye on the orchard wall.

Once they were back in the alley, Macro stopped again and holstered his gun.

"Do you have a map of this city?" he asked Lossy.

Anchor set her back down and stood between her and the route to the orchard. She looked up at him with a feeble whine and turned back to Macro, fixing him with a leer.

"A map? What for?"

"To scout out every route to and from the orchard, what else would I want one for?" Macro waved his arms in exasperation.

"Well you are a pirate. Anyway, no. I don't have a map."

"Then where can I get one?"

Macro pulled out his computer and did a quick internet search for Cyan City. None of them were as detailed as he'd have liked. Just as he'd expected. This was going to be impossible.

It was at times like this he wished he could fly to get a clear aerial view. If Switch wasn't recovering from a splintered wing, he'd have

messaged him to get his feathered tail down into the city and scout out the vicinity.

He folded his arms and leant back against the wall. "Know any flying types who can help us?"

Lossy shook her head and stared weakly at the road. "I… don't have many friends."

"Huh." He scratched his scar. "No one who can help us?"

She shook her head again.

Macro tutted. He found that hard to believe. But he wasn't going to force her. They were just going to have to do this alone.

Or he was, at least.

"Anchor, get her back home," he said. "Keep her sane. I'll go and find a way into that orchard without being seen. See what they're up to, and take it from there."

"You serious?" the granbull scoffed.

"Deathly." Macro met his frown with a leer. "I don't want her doing anything foolish. Leave this to me. I'll message you if anything goes wrong."

Anchor groaned and pushed back his mohawk. "Seriously, Cap'n. Don't do anything crazy, all right?" He placed a paw on the dewott's shoulders. "Come along, ma'am. Let's get you a hot cup of tea or something, yeah?"

Macro watched them go, feeling a cold chill wash over his body. Do this alone… why did it suddenly feel like a bad idea?

…

Annie turned in her new outfit, trying to catch it in the right light. The waistcoat jacket came down to her hips. A little shorter than she would have liked, but it had belonged to a skuntank and they were a bit smaller than a human even on their hind legs. Somehow, Web had managed to acquire a pair of trousers. When Annie had asked, all the skuntank had said was that she'd just looked in the right place. The thread and needle lying on her bedside table told Annie that Web had been patching things up, and going off the colour of the thread it had been the trousers. They were baggy, which she liked.

No shoes, however. She was walking around bare foot. She'd need to do something about that.

The white robe had been fashioned into a frilly white shirt. She certainly had to admire Web's sewing skills. The poor skuntank hadn't slept a wink and kept yawning as Annie turned before the full-length wall mirror.

"Not bad," she said finally.

Web paused mid-yawn and frowned slightly, but she hid whatever she had to say behind a nod.

"I'm just glad it fits," said Web. "I was a bit concerned the trousers would be too big, or too small to be honest. I've never made clothes to fit a human before."

"You're good at it," said Annie.

That elicited a smile from the skuntank and she drew closer to Annie to look in the mirror.

"I can't sew to save my life," said Annie. "Well done, Web. I might make you my personal tailor."

The skuntank laughed and turned back to her night stand. She gathered her sewing equipment up noisily into its tin container.

"It'll keep you warmer than that robe," she said. "Just be careful not to tear it. I don't think I could afford the fabric to make you anything new. I was fortunate enough to find the stuff to make the trousers."

Annie spun on the spot, wafting up the smell of dust and skunk. Her nose crinkled slightly but she forced a smile.

"Don't worry. I won't go snagging it on any wire or anything," she said. "Now. Is Waveform back yet?"

"I've not seen him all morning," said Web. "I don't think he came back last night, either. He might still be trying to make some money to buy all the stuff to build your ship."

Web's voice was thick with disapproval that Annie chose to ignore. She folded her arms and puffed out her chest.

"Ah yes. My pyukumuku ship. Maybe I should go and look for him."

"I wouldn't go out like that, dear," said Web. "Not many pokemon would be quite as accepting as we are. You might cause quite the fright."

Annie waved a hand. "Fright schmight. I'm gonna go have a look for him. Rebellions can't dither around forever."

"They also don't happen overnight," said Web. "They take time to plan." She narrowed her eyes. "Carefully."

Annie gave another dismissive wave and strolled from the room, wafting away a cloud of musty skunk that she was convinced she could see. Oh well. Some fresh air might make it dissipate.

As she strolled through the front door, she walked smack into a thick wall of putrid air. Her nose almost retreated into her face. Great, she'd almost forgotten about that. She wafted a hand before her nose and looked up at the sky.

Daylight.

Weren't decidueye nocturnal?

She shrugged and marched on, keeping her ears open and her wits about her. There was no sense in being careless.

The cold concrete floor felt wet on her feet, but she trudged along regardless. Slight movements in passing windows drew her eye ever so fleetingly, meeting the retreating baffled faces of various colourful pokemon. She thrust her hands into her pockets and looked up at the passing buildings. Worn out. Boarded up. Covered in heavy graffiti and posters. Some leapt out at her, depicting the faded faces of various grumpy-looking pokemon beneath a red 'wanted' sign. Most of them rewarded a hefty price.

Maybe that would be her one day?

…

Tracer's computer lit up with a bright dancing telephone as it rang away at him. One flick of his paw across the screen and the image expanded out into an anonymous black window. The voice that came out of it was hoarse and scratchy, and he pulled his ears back to reduce some of the awful grating.

"Is this the detective office?" the voice asked.

"Yes, you've reached Tracer." They could have given him time to announce himself, he thought.

"Oh good. 'Cos I've just seen a terrifying thing walking around Spool City."

His ears flicked up again, and Widget leapt up to place both paws on his desk, straining to see the anonymous black box. Did he think they were going to show it? And wait… was his tail wagging?

Tracer fired the eevee a disapproving look from the corner of his eye then turned back to the screen. He couldn't see them, but there was

always the chance they could see him.

"What was it?" he asked. "A crime?"

"A thing!" the voice replied. "Walked on two legs like some pokemon, but it looked like none I ever saw. Just strolled right past my house."

Tracer frowned and took a long drag on his cigar. Was this the human Socket had told him about? He couldn't see it being anything else, unless there was a sudden invasion of humans.

"About how long ago was this?" Tracer asked.

"About five minutes ago," said the voice. "If that."

"Please tell me your address? I'll investigate."

"No chance I'm givin' my address out to the fuzz," said the voice. "But it was on Proxy Boulevard."

The delphox let out a stream of smoke and reached across to the screen. "I'm on it. Take care if you go outside."

"Ain't goin' outside with that walkin' around!" The voice cut off, leaving behind nothing more than Tracer's desktop wallpaper.

Defrag turned her head to look at him and pushed back one of her long ears.

"Do you need me to go with you?" she asked, somewhat hopeful.

Tracer stood up fast, almost knocking his chair over.

"No," he said. "There might be more sightings. Take as many messages as you can, and search message boards and news sites to map this creature's route to narrow down its whereabouts. There's every chance we might not find it this time."

Tracer turned to the door and grabbed his trench coat and mask from the wall hooks. Widget, however, was almost out of the door.

"Widget!" he barked. "Mask."

The eevee moaned loudly and turned to grab his mask from Tracer's offered paw. Once they were outside, the delphox made a pointed effort to check Widget had put his on properly.

"I've told you a billion times," Widget whined. "I'm immune."

Tracer looked up at the roof of his office as they moved away from it. "I refuse to believe you until I have hard, scientific evidence."

Widget spread one paw. "I am 'hard, scientific evidence'!"

"Keep your voice down," Tracer told him. "We've got a human to find."

Widget mumbled under his breath and trotted to keep up with Tracer's long strides. His paw steps were deceptively loud for his small frame. Both a blessing and a curse depending on the situation, and right now they gave away any indication that at least one pokemon was about to turn the corner.

Proxy Boulevard stretched out on either side, curving around the bend to their left where it would inevitably end in Proxy City, where it also began. The once spectacular road linked all three outskirt towns of Meta City, but despite its presence it was rarely active. Very little transport passed through, mainly because most of the pokemon couldn't afford it, and those that could avoided the outskirts like the plague. As such, it had sadly fallen into disrepair.

"So this is the place it was spotted?" Widget asked, looking back and forth.

"Allegedly."

Tracer reached around his back to check his stick was still properly stored within the thick fur of his tail. Then he pressed on, moving slowly along the boulevard.

Boarded up buildings and tatty houses spread on either side in typical outskirts fashion, but just because they were boarded up didn't mean they were uninhabited. That meant whichever house it was that had spotted the human was impossible to say.

The wind picked up, followed by a noise like a cracking whip. Tracer leapt to the side and instinctively reached for his stick, then berated himself. It was only a torn poster flapping in the wind.

Widget chuckled, which the delphox returned with a glare through the green glass of his goggles. It wasn't like him to be jumpy at all. This human nonsense had got to his head. He placed his stick back in his tail and continued his way down the boulevard with an air of nonchalance.

On the other side of the road, two small scraggy bolted around the corner from a side road. The front one stopped with his back pressed against the building and waited for his friend to catch up, before they turned and raced along the boulevard. The look of sheer terror on their faces was enough to twig Tracer in.

"I think we've found our human," he told Widget quietly.

Guess he needed his stick after all.

He considered reaching for it, then decided against it. He might just need both paws free.

The two detectives ran across the road, but neither scraggy looked up. He spotted the two children run into an alley where he greatly hoped they actually lived and wouldn't end up trapped if the human gave chase. Who knew what this creature was capable of?

He retraced their footsteps and slowed down when he reached the side road. A quick glance down it solidified his fears. There stood the human, but not in the white robe it had previously been wearing. Now it was kitted out to look like a space pirate.

His muzzle creased with confusion and he watched curiously as the gangly creature strutted along the road, eying up the various posters, most notably the 'wanted' ones. Dressed as a pirate… checking out the wanted posters. Regretting a life decision? Or just plain curious? Or… like Surge… masquerading?

He shook his head and motioned to Widget to wait. Carefully he crept along, keeping both eyes on the human. With his long strides, he soon caught up with them. Reaching out, he grabbed it by the arm and reached behind him with the other paw for his stick.

"Sorry," he said. "But I'm afraid you're coming with me."

Before he'd finished his sentence, the human snapped its head around and fixed him with a pair of baffled green eyes. Then it shouted in a feminine voice;

"Stranger danger!"

One large furless paw swung around, clasped into a fist, and struck him in the side of the jaw. Spit flew from his lips and coated the inside of his mask, and he flew sideways into the wall. Pain radiated through his shoulder, and his stick clattered to the floor where he'd been standing.

"Wretched human!" Widget roared.

The eevee launched himself full throttle at the retreating ape-like creature. All Tracer could do was watch as he nursed his sore jaw. The impact had fractured the filter on his mask, and putrid air flowed through it like a faucet.

Something flashed through the sky and Widget dropped his haunches as he desperately tried to break.

"Whoa!" he shouted. "I'm immune to disease, but not arrows! Who's throwin' stuff?"

The eevee looked up and Tracer followed his eyes. A decidueye shot down towards him, talons bared, but instead he grabbed the human and whisked her away out of Widget's reach.

Waveform… Tracer shook his head. He knew that pokemon. He was a mercenary. Tracer had reached out to him before he found Surge, but the decidueye blatantly refused to help him.

"Hold on," Waveform told the human.

She reached up one slender paw to fasten around the owl pokemon's leg, then with the other… she gestured something by her face right at Tracer. Something juvenile. And stuck out her tongue.

After that, they were gone.

Tracer pushed himself to his feet, keeping his paw fastened firmly over the broken filter on his mask. His eyes never left the spot the decidueye had appeared.

Widget rejoined his side and looked back at the still quivering arrow.

"Almost hit me he did," he said. He looked up at Tracer and raised an eyebrow. "You all right?"

"Yes, fine. She broke my mask is all." He sighed and turned on the spot. "Let's get back to the office."

"Want to borrow my mask?" Widget asked. "Unlike you, I don't need it."

"Thanks for the offer, but yours might be a little small, my friend."

"All right." Widget paused and glanced back at the silver weapon. "I might grab that arrow. Consider it evidence."

"Evidence?"

"Yeh!" said Widget. "He tried to assault a long arm of the law!"

"I don't think you're using that right. But whatever. Take it." Tracer looked back over his shoulder at the silent street. He was still rather dazed, but one thing was seriously bugging him and he wasn't going to dispute the eevee's interest in the arrow. "I am wondering, though, what on earth Waveform wants with a human."

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 29

Chapter Twenty Nine

Annie barged through the door and stomped into the kitchen, leaving mucky footprints on Web's freshly mopped floor. Waveform followed her closely, having neatly hung up his quiver beside the door. Annie then flopped into a chair, and Web watched with regret as the human kicked her feet up onto the table.

"You'll never believe this," said Annie. "Some fox tried to grab me!"

A soft glug came from the bucket as Zip rose up to the top, his mouth gaping open.

"Grab you?" Web asked.

"Oh, I'd believe it." Waveform fell down in a seat beside Annie. "He's a detective. Probably been asked to hunt you down."

"I'm more surprised he tried to grab her," said Web. "Tracer isn't exactly one to spare a flamethrower."

"Wait, you know this fox?" Annie asked. "What's he doin' grabbing at a defenseless girl in the streets?"

"Trying to take you back to Socket, I'd reckon." Waveform took two glasses of juice from Web and shoved one towards Annie. "Get that down you. It'll stave off some effects of the air."

Annie eyed the brown 'juice' with suspicion, then sniffed it. Chocolate? What?

"I don't know what you were doing outside like that anyway," Waveform scoffed. "You don't exactly blend in."

Annie's attention drifted to the opaque yellowed window.

"Looking for you," said Web. "That's what she told me, anyway."

"I was?" Annie looked around with a start, then scratched her chin. "Man, I've forgotten after all that kerfuffle."

Web's brow knit together with concern and she looked from Annie to Waveform. "How did it go, anyway?"

"I made two thousand five hundred credits throwing two space pirates behind bars," he said. "And every credit went on materials for the ship. All of that should be here by dawn."

"Every credit?" Web asked.

"Yeah. I just hope it's enough to meet Trojan's expectations."

"You never thought to wait and ask him?"

Waveform narrowed his eyes. "Could you have personally guaranteed me I could have put all those credits in a jar and no one would have touched them?"

Web sighed and glanced away. "We do have bills to pay…" She shook her head then looked back up at Waveform. "You could have considered that, at least."

"Like I've said before, space pirates don't just drop out of the sky into my lap! If we're gonna get this thing built-"

"Why is this so important to you?" Web asked.

Waveform necked the contents of his glass and slammed it down onto the table, then he rose to his feet and marched from the kitchen.

Annie watched him leave then turned and met Web's grey eyes. The skuntank sighed again and reached across the table for the discarded glass.

"It is pretty important," said Annie.

Web looked up sharply, still sprawled across the table.

"The ship," Annie added.

The skuntank shook her head and scooped up the glass. "I don't know why you want to start a rebellion so badly, either. I'm hoping some sense comes out of all this, because clearly Waveform can see something I just can't."

"It would help us marine pokemon," said Zip. "So I can see good in it."

"I guess," said Web. "I mean… there's always a risk that law could get out of hand."

"It's already out of hand!" said Zip. "And I want to help stop it."

"Oh no," said Web sadly. "A nice young boy like you isn't going to get into a rebellion. You've got your whole life ahead of you."

"Hey, hey," said Annie before Zip could retaliate. "Numbers are numbers. The kid wants in, he's on board."

"Oh really?" Web turned and gave her an exasperated look. "And how do you suggest he moves around? You know… in case we have to run to safety?"

Annie scratched her chin again and met the goldeen's pleading gaze. No legs… that certainly was a predicament. She stood and retrieved the bucket, splashing water in her attempt to lift it.

"Oh, come now," said Web. "Where do you plan to take him?" As Annie left the kitchen, Web's voice called after her, "The rest of the house isn't water proof!"

The bucket was oddly heavy. Annie staggered up the stairs and paused at a closed door. Techno music blasted from it, and a dim

light spread out from the gap beneath. She placed the bucket down and knocked twice.

The door jerked open and Trojan's tired eyes leered at her from the green-lit room. Then the colour changed to a red. Then a purple. Annie craned her neck to see over his shoulder. Some strange light sat beside his desk, smoothly changing colour.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

Annie turned her attention back to him and pointed to the goldeen.

"He needs legs," she said. "Can you make him legs?"

The scrafty looked from Zip then back to Annie. "You kidding me?"

"Nope. Kid needs legs." Annie turned from the door and waved. "I'll leave him with you. Talk things over, okay?"

"I'm already designing your wimpy ship!" Trojan snapped.

She paused on the stairwell and pointed a finger at him. "Don't you hate on pyukumuku. I'll make you eat those words."

Trojan's leer fell away and he reached up with one paw to rub at his head fin. He watched Annie trudge down the stairs then looked back down at Zip.

"She's right, you know," said the goldeen. "Pyukumuku might not do much, but they sure are prickly!"

…

Macro was seriously beginning to question his sanity.

He stood with his back to the wall, keeping one eye on the low branch with his ear pressed up against the cold stone. All that reached him were muffled voices, but that was enough evidence to prove the grass army was still there. Climbing over the wall was out

of the question. If they'd come armed, they would very likely have the weapons to deal with him. Ground, most likely. And the presence of torterra amongst them was very unnerving. An earthquake from one of them would be enough to take him out and drag the wall down with him… if it didn't also reduce one or two of the apartment blocks.

Sticking close to the wall, he scurried along it with one paw on his laser. It had to end somewhere. There had to be an entrance to the orchard. If he had to guess, those grass types hadn't come via the lake like he had. There were too many of them for that. Their ship would have dropped them in the orchard itself, or some other secluded place. The entrance could be on the other side of the orchard, which was too far away for his liking. He wanted to get this over with quickly and report back to Anchor. Come up with a plan to get the twins back safely.

The more he followed the wall, the longer it seemed to get. Looking back over his shoulder didn't alleviate the feeling, either. It wasn't until he reached another narrow alleyway forking from his right that he realised the orchard wall extended all the way out to the lake. So it was right behind the apartments. Perfect cover, unless someone were to look out of their window and spot the grass types, and with the trouble he'd had doing so, the grass army could rest assured that each one of them was camouflaged amongst the trees and bushes.

Finally, the wall came to an end, curving neatly away from him along an empty square. On the far side of the square stood a town hall, and it was surrounded by empty market stands. A conveniently placed sign told any passers by that the next market day was two days away. Three a week, selling locally made produce. He could almost smell the cakes and pies that would be filling the stalls, amongst other bits and pieces.

He tore his eyes from the empty stands and focused on following the wall. More branches poked over the top and swung down into the market square. Some of them contained tempting berries and his paw reached up towards a red cheri. He'd never seen one so big. DL

would have loved that on a cake. He flexed his claws and let his paw fall back to his side. No. It didn't feel right. Even if he did take it, it wouldn't survive in his pouch. It would just be a waste.

Not to mention a sticky mess.

Something moved overhead rustling the leaves and his eyes flew to it. Munching away on one of the cheri berries was a caterpie. What was a caterpie doing in Cyan City? Was it with the grass army? No, impossible. It wasn't a grass type. The grass type pokemon resented them almost as much as they resented the water and fire types. Obviously the bugs had moved in to help themselves to the berries, benefited only by their small size. Easier to hide.

He shook his head and hugged the wall until he spotted something sparkling in the distance. A gate, caught in the noon sunlight.

Keeping himself low and his steps light, he scurried along the wall until he reached the gate. He stopped with his back against the wall and gave the gate a once over.

Locked.

He wasn't getting in there easily. If he used his lock pick, not only would the grass army hear him, he'd be stood around long enough for them to see him, too. He grit his teeth together and peered beyond the gate. Now he knew what he was looking for, it was easier to see the grass pokemon. A pair of tangela stood a good way away, poking around the bushes with their tentacle-like vines. Closer to him was a grotle, also poking about in the bushes. What were they doing? Raiding?

A razz berry bush just beyond the gate rustled and he ducked aside, craning his head around to peek through the silver bars. What emerged rolling backwards on a fat berry wasn't a grass type. It was another bug. A weedle. The orchard must have been infested by bugs. He looked over at the grotle again. An ivysaur strolled towards

the turtle pokemon on its hind legs carrying something in its paws. A white box.

The grotle opened it eagerly, and several caterpie rushed out of it, drawn to the bush like magnets.

Macro's eyes widened and trailed over the hundreds of berry trees and bushes. This wasn't just some invasion with the intension to fire lasers at any water types they saw. No… it was biological warfare. The grass army intended to wipe out Cyan City's food source, forcing the water types into a famine. It was hardly a subtle move, either. Those poor oshawott twins would likely die if the army was caught. He had to warn someone before the situation got wildly out of hand.

He looked back down at the weedle, now lying on its back with the purple razz berry clasped between its tiny legs. Something wasn't right about it. Sure, bug types had a large appetite. Especially ones that would be classed as a larval stage. But there was something very wrong he couldn't quite put his claw on.

It was too far away to grab. He had to lure it somehow.

He turned away from the gate, creeping back down the wall towards one of the low-hanging branches. A pecha tree lay not too far away, and was too high up to grab. He crouched down then jumped, snatching at the branch. His paw closed over the leaves and he was left hanging as his other paw flailed for one of the berries. A long green shape dropped from the leaves and struck him on the face. Stifling a yelp, he dropped and landed hard on his bottom. The green thing fell away from him and landed on its back, flailing four button-like legs.

A caterpie.

Well, it wasn't the weedle, but he only needed one specimen to prove his point.

He scooped up the bug and rose to his feet, glancing left and right over the wall. Muffled voices, nothing frantic. He'd not been spotted, thankfully. He turned and retraced his steps along the wall, clutching the writhing bug to his chest. Not a squeak came from it. Silent, mute, no voice. What on earth was wrong with it?

It seemed to take forever to reach the alley that lead back to the main road. Once he was inside it, he pulled out his pocket computer, keeping the bug locked firmly under his left arm. It only rang twice before Anchor's voice spoke oddly loudly into his ear.

"Cap'n?"

"Where are you?" Macro demanded.

"Apartment to the left of the alley where those little kids went missing." Anchor answered. "Where are you?"

"Just in that alley." The caterpie began to struggle and Macro almost dropped his computer in an attempt to control it. "Meet me at the door."

Before Anchor could respond, Macro hung up and pushed his computer back into his belt pouch. With both paws, he locked the caterpie tightly against his scarf. Soggy string flowed from what he guessed was its mouth, winding around his arms and creating a sticky waterfall of web down his scarf. Macro stared down at the mess, then followed the white strands along the floor, all the way back to the end of the alley. The thread vanished around the corner. Wretched bug had left a trail!

He tutted and stuffed the caterpie into his scarf head first, wrapping the fabric firmly over is head where it began to bulge with sticky string. Clutching it tightly, he trotted to the main road and turned sharply left. The apartment door flew open and Macro almost collided with Anchor's torso.

"Whoa!" The granbull caught him with both paws and pushed him back, checking him over once then looking over his shoulder. "Were you chased or somethin'?"

"No, I wasn't chased! What do you take me for?" Macro pushed past him into the lobby and made a beeline for the elevator.

"What do I take you for?" Anchor scoffed. "You often end up in trouble. What've you got hold of?"

"What floor?" Macro stepped into the elevator, but Anchor beat him to the panel, selecting the third floor. "And I've got a bug."

"Contagious?"

Macro fixed his violet eyes on the granbull's and pulled back his scarf from the caterpie. Thread pooled out onto the floor, and Anchor took a step backwards to avoid it.

"What did you pick that up for?" Anchor asked.

Macro tucked it away once more, stifling its silk-spewing.

"I can explain when we get to Lossy's apartment," said Macro. "If you wouldn't mind cleaning up that mess, that would be great. Darn bug's been leaving a silk trail."

Anchor rolled his eyes and silently scooped up the sticky mess.

The elevator pinged and Macro strolled out, pausing to look back at Anchor. He rose to his feet, grimacing at the white sludge coating his paws. Most of it had come off the tiles, but there was still a nice patch of silk clinging to the surface. Not noticeable unless one knew what they were looking for, but it wouldn't be very pleasant on a pokemon's feet.

Anchor deposited the silk into a trash can then nodded for Macro to follow him. "It's this way."

Macro trotted after him, trying in vain to stop the thread from leaking through the gaps in his scarf. Anchor stopped at the fifth door along and knocked twice before slipping inside.

Soft blue carpet greeted Macro's feet, a welcome change to the cold tile. Lossy sat behind a coffee table, sipping at a steaming cup. Her eyes widened when she spotted him and immediately went to his silk-leaking scarf. She let the cup clatter onto a metal coaster and rose to her feet.

"What on earth is that?!" she gasped.

"Caterpie." Macro let the green bug drop onto her coffee table in a pool of silk, where the spewing finally came to an end.

Lossy stared down at it, mouth agape.

"Again," said Anchor. "What are you doin' with a caterpie?"

"I found it in the orchard," said Macro. "The grass army is releasing bug pokemon that are just devouring berries and leaves."

Lossy looked up at him slowly. "You aren't serious?"

"I'm deathly serious," said Macro. "Why else would I have carried this sticky thing back with me?" He pawed feebly at the silk clinging to his scarf. "This is never gonna come out…"

Anchor dropped to his knees to get a good look at the caterpie. His brow knit together as he watched the bug turn its head to look around the room.

"We have to tell someone," said Lossy. "We can't just let bug pokemon roam in the orchard! Unless we reason with them… We do have two common enemies." She scratched between her ears. "Which makes me wonder why the grass types would have formed an alliance with them? They hate bug pokemon."

"I wouldn't think it's an alliance," said Anchor.

"What makes you say that?" said Macro.

"Well, this thing's as empty as DL when we got her, Cap'n." Anchor looked up at him. "I mean… look at its eyes. They're lifeless."

Macro squatted beside Anchor, watching the caterpie's black eyes. No sparkle. Blank. Unchanging. Its antennae twitched at every movement in the air, but it was clear it was looking for something. Or sniffing for something.

"But it panicked," said Macro.

"You don't need to have a personality to panic," said Anchor. "It's basic survival."

"So you think they removed its personality like DL?" Macro growled.

"Not quite." Anchor reached across to the caterpie and moved a claw before its eyes. They didn't even move to it. "I'd say they've gone even further. There's nothin' left in this thing other than primal instinct."

Macro stood up so quickly Lossy squeaked. "What is wrong with this stinking world?!"

"Calm down, Cap'n! We don't want to get all of Cyan City into an uproar!"

"I'd say that's exactly what we need." Macro rounded on Lossy. "Who's in charge here? I want to show them exactly what that grass army is doing not only to your city but to the bug types as well."

"But…" Anchor lowered his voice. "But what about your bounty, Cap'n?"

"Sod it." Macro folded his arms and leered down at the green caterpillar. "We've got bigger things to worry about right now. If this grass army has unleashed a biological warfare on this orchard, what's to stop them doing it elsewhere? A famine in one city can

easily spread to a famine across System. I'm willing to risk my own life to stop an all out war before it starts."

Anchor's eyes widened. "Are you serious? I don't think I've ever heard you talk like that. What changed?"

"I realised this could affect more than one measly city." Macro fixed him with a sideways glare. "I happen to live in this world. I don't wanna live through a war!"

Anchor sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "And here I thought you were just being humble."

Lossy sat back down heavily, staring blankly at the bug pokemon. Anchor looked down at her and placed a paw on her shoulder.

"You all right, ma'am?" he asked.

"I'm… just a bit shaken up." Her voice wavered and she diverted her gaze to the closed door. "First my kids… then space pirates… an invasion… bug pokemon… I don't understand what's going on any more. And what's this DL you were talking about? No personality?" She looked back down at the caterpie and her face paled.

"DL doesn't concern you," Macro said bluntly. Then he pointed at the bug pokemon. "This, however, does. Now tell me… who's in charge?"

"Give her a rest, Cap'n."

"No." Macro swatted his large paw away and turned back to Lossy. "I want you to contact them."

Anchor sighed again and retrieved the dewott's cup from amongst the silk. "I'll make you another coffee."

Macro continued to stare at her, meeting her terrified eyes. DL's voice echoed in his head. 'You really need to remember your p's and q's.'

He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index claws. "Can you contact them? Please?"

Something dropped in the adjoining kitchenette and shattered off the tile floor. Anchor's mohawk stiffened along with his spine and he glanced at the mawile over his shoulder.

Lossy looked up at Macro and her eyes softened slightly. "I can, but I'm still feeling rather shaken. If you wouldn't mind getting me my phone… it's on the kitchen counter."

Macro flexed his claws and turned away from her. Just like she'd said, her small touchscreen phone lay on the counter beside a vase of faux flowers. As he reached for it, he caught Anchor's bemused stare.

"Are you feelin' all right, Cap'n?" he asked.

Macro frowned and aimed the phone at him. "Shut up."

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 30

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Thirty

Lossy led Macro and Anchor all the way to the town square. Macro clutched the writhing caterpie to his chest, enveloped in his scarf, as his mind stretched back to the events that had followed in the dewott's apartment. His mouth was dry and he licked his lips as he looked around the square. Her phone conversation had been somewhat shaky and had avoided mentioning her helpers were space pirates at all costs. She'd only spoken to the Governor's assistant, promising a call back after he'd passed on the news. Then not even ten minutes later, the Governor himself rang back, demanding to speak to Lossy and her two 'helpers' without asking for any further information over the phone.

Macro was dreading what this Governor's reaction would be. Given he only had authority in Cyan City, his power and influence paled in comparison to Socket's. But he'd still be the first line of contact should she want to find out what was going on in Cyan City.

The Governor's office was situated at the edge of the market, being the main focal point of the square, especially since the market was closed for the day. Beside the building sat a police station that was rather unimpressive in comparison. Cyan City's flag fluttered atop the Governor's office in the artificial breeze, depicting a rain drop against a deep azure sky.

The door was unguarded from the outside. A quick scan of the wall told Macro there were cameras, and not the stealthy hidden kind that some government bodies used. The white-shelled, black-eyed cameras looked like something out of an old sci-fi movie, and they fixed the group with a suspicious stare. He even saw the camera lenses focus.

Lossy rang the buzzer and waited. The voice that followed was familiar. Gritty, like the one he'd heard back in her apartment.

"Hello?" it asked.

"It's Lossy," she replied. "The Governor asked to see me?"

"Oh yes! Hold on one second."

The voice cut out then the buzzer gave a deafening ring. Macro leapt as the lock clicked up and he hugged his writhing scarf tightly. His heart was hammering in his chest but he did his best to hide it, boldly following the dewott into the lobby.

A large bibarel stood behind the counter and he removed his reading glasses to get a good look at them.

"So you're the young lady who called?" His gritty voice didn't remotely suit him.

He looked up from Lossy to eye Macro and Anchor, and his eyes narrowed as he squinted at them. Maybe he needed the glasses for more than just reading?

"You two don't look like water types," he said. "Are you here with this young lady?"

"Yes," said Macro all too quickly.

His heart was still hammering. He was beginning to fear that the secretary's hearing made up for his poor eyesight and he'd actually be able to hear it.

"Very well." The secretary reached for a pen and notepad. "I'll need you three to sign in."

Lossy took the pen and glanced back at the two space pirates.

"I-" she stammered. "I'll sign in for all three of us, okay?"

"That is fine." The bibarel sat back in his chair and replaced his spectacles.

Macro kept a close eye on him, but he didn't look back up from his computer. Once Lossy was done, the bibarel retrieved the notepad and pushed a buzzer on the desk.

"You have-" he read over the notepad. "Lossy here to see you. And…"

He trailed off and looked back up at Macro and Anchor. A look of realization began to cross his face, but before he could say anything more, the Governor's voice rang out from his speaker.

"Fantastic! Send them in right away."

"Okay…" The bibarel cleared his throat. "It's just through those double doors. Room Two A."

Macro met the secretary's gaze, but Lossy grabbed him by the elbow as she mumbled her thanks and steered him alongside her towards the Governor's office.

Two A was exactly where Macro would have expected it to be. The words 'Governor Jumper' were even printed in gold over the window.

Lossy knocked twice and a deep voice from beyond the door instructed them to 'come in'. Two simple words that chilled Macro to the bone.

A lithe frogadier hunched over a low desk, decorated to resemble an old mahogany antique. But like most antique-style furniture, Macro could easily guess it was made from plastic and chrome. He looked up when they entered and his yellow eyes went from worried to furious to plain confused in a split second.

"Lossy, right?" he asked the dewott. Then he look up at her two companions. "Why, may I ask, are you accompanied by Hunter of

Wildcard Gamma?"

"Because…" She wound her paws together and her eyes flitted from Macro to Anchor. "Because they helped me… They… They know what happened to my children…"

"And… let me guess…" Jumper let his pen drop to the table and sat back in his chair. "That writhing thing leaking silk is the caterpie you were telling me about?"

Macro's eyes snapped to his writhing scarf. He'd been clutching it so tightly the caterpie had begun to protest violently and a gap had opened in the folds, letting sticky silk flow out onto the linoleum floor like a faucet.

"Oh right… yeh." He chuckled nervously and pulled the fabric back from the caterpie's head. "Yeah, it's-"

The frogadier waved his paw. "Don't say anything, Hunter. Lossy told me everything. Let me look at it."

Jumper's voice was laced with venom. It pushed Macro's fur on end and he had to bite back a sneer. He took a confident stride forward and deposited the sticky caterpillar right onto the Governor's paperwork. He folded his arms and took a step back, letting a smirk spread over his lips. At least it covered up the fact he was deeply regretting folding his arms over his immensely sticky scarf.

Jumper sighed and tried to rescue some of his paperwork from beneath the silent bug.

"Wipe that smile off your face, Hunter," he said. "You should know full well the risk you're taking being here in Cyan City."

Macro snorted. "If I weren't here, you'd have no idea that grass army was in your City. Or that they're releasing bug pokemon to attack your orchards."

Jumper narrowed his eyes at him and shook string from one of his files. "That is the only reason I'm not throwing you behind bars. Now… I think I know full well why you're here. Socket warned me you might show up. Nevertheless, right now… I hate to say this, but… I'm in your debt." He raised a paw before Macro could chip in with a snippy comment. "But don't go demanding anything off me. All you've done is alert me to something that would have become obvious in a day or so. I can pay you back by letting you keep your freedom and get out of this city. If you're not gone by nightfall, my word will no longer protect you and you're back to being free game. Understood?"

Macro snorted and turned his back on the frogadier. He struck Anchor in the lower back with his paw.

"Come on, Anchor. Let's get that disk and scat."

"But…" Lossy clutched her paws together and looked between the space pirates and the governor. "My children…"

"Don't worry, Lossy," said Jumper. "Cyan City's army will deal with the grass threat and rescue your children."

Macro paused by the door and fixed the Governor with a sneer. "You send an army in there guns blazin', those kids are as good as dead."

Lossy let out a wail and fell heavily into the nearest chair. Jumper looked up at Macro with a start and his eyes narrowed dangerously.

"I think my army knows what they're doing, Hunter," he said. "Don't you go scaring a worried mother with your lies!"

"They ain't lies," Macro retorted. "I've seen enough combat to know things can go from bad to worse. I heard with my own ears that army is keeping those kids as a bargain to get away."

"Murder is illegal and punishable by death," Jumper said slowly. "I sincerely doubt that a law abiding army-"

"Law abiding?! Yeah right! Look what they've done to that caterpie then tell me they wouldn't hesitate to murder a couple of kids!"

Lossy sobbed loudly and her face fell into her paws.

Jumper met Macro's leer for a long, painful moment, then sighed, letting his pen drop beside the caterpie. His eyes went to the bug, watching as it scanned the room with its blank, black eyes.

"Maybe there are risks," he said. "But I can assure you we will get those kids back."

"Yeah?" Macro pulled the door open. "Let's see who gets there first, then."

Jumper narrowed his eyes again. "What are you saying, Hunter?"

"I'm sayin' I never leave a job unfinished."

With that, he let the door slam shut behind him.

…

Socket's office filled with digital ringing, penetrating her sound filter which was primarily thrown up to tune out Tweak's incessant jingling. She frowned at the chingling bouncing in the corner of her office while he leafed through and stamped her paperwork, then brought up her holoscreen. Yobi's tired face filled it and he looked up from his indescribable nicknacks to address her.

"Good afternoon, Madam Mayor," he said.

"Good to see you out of your sick bed, Yobi," she said. "What are you ringing me for, exactly?"

"To be honest," he looked back down at his work, "to let you know I'm out of my 'sick bed'."

Socket did not appreciate his air quotes. She steepled her paws together and narrowed her eyes at him.

"You look just as dreadful as you did before you fainted," she said.

He gave a dry laugh but didn't look up from whatever he was attacking with his screwdriver. Part of her wondered if he was imagining whatever it was to be her face. Not that she cared.

"Someone has to make these things," he said. "Besides, I'm still trying to work out the kinks in that worm you want me to send to Download Database."

"Oh yes, the worm." She let her paws drop onto her desk and leant back in her chair. "When will that be ready?"

"Like I said, it has kinks," he said. "Obviously we don't want it to kill the host. But we do want it to incapacitate her and make her easier to retrieve."

"I am less concerned about retrieving that pachirisu than I am Hunter. I just want that nuisance of a pirate to stop meddling in my plans."

"Then the virus is a win-win," he said. "It will incapacitate her, we can retrieve her along with Hunter and his goons, and it will also prevent him working around her database to access confidential files."

"Tweak already dealt with that," she said. "Download Database's reach is severely limited."

"Doesn't mean she can't be hacked around," said Yobi. "If there was a surefire way to stop other pokemon from accessing databases, hackers would have been powerless centuries ago."

Socket snorted, then covered up the rather unfeminine sound by scratching her nose.

"I know it sounds ridiculous, but believe me," said Yobi. "There's a massive risk. We definitely need to either retrieve the pachirisu, or shut her down until we manage to obtain her. The worm will do both. Not only will it shut down the database, it will also allow us to track her down."

"Yes, since the last tracker was destroyed," said Socket. "I hired a mercenary to track down Hunter and her last update was less than reassuring."

"Well." Yobi scratched behind his ear with an oily paw, leaving an unsightly black streak on his orange fur. "Unless they have some means of detecting, isolating and destroying a worm, then this method will be much more reliable than a little tracking chip."

"Fantastic news." Socket steepled her paws again and leant forwards on her elbows. "When will it be ready?"

Yobi cleared his throat and shot her a fleeting glance. The kind he often gave her before he fled a room.

"I already said, it has some kinks." His voice came out with as much haste as a rapidash trying to escape a tsunami. "That last episode of mine cost me some serious time, but I'll keep working on it, and as soon as it's ready, I-"

Socket raised her paw to cut him off. "You will make sure you rest, young man. I don't want you to lose yet more time with another fainting episode. You understand me?"

Her dagger voice caused his eyes to widen, and he closed his mouth tight and nodded.

"Yes, Madam Mayor," he said. "I understand completely. I'll set this android aside and get to working on the worm as my number one priority."

Before she could even ask what importance the new android served, he vanished, and her holoscreen retreated into its desk entirely of its own accord.

She sat back in her seat and sighed, rubbing at her forehead with one paw. "Stupid technology."

…

It certainly wasn't dawn when the materials arrived. It was more like dusk.

Cold wind whipped at Annie's hair as she stared up at the skip of scrap metal. Sheet upon warped sheet of varying grey, splashed here and there with the occasional neon colour. Most of which was marred with rust.

Waveform crouched on the edge of the skip with admirable balance. He rifled through the jagged sheets, the sharp edges snagging and snipping at his brown wing feathers. He didn't seem to mind, or notice. One or the other. Finally, he turned his sharp eyes onto Annie and Web.

"It's all here," he said. "All three thousand five hundred credits worth."

Web stifled a sigh. "You paid all that for this?"

"In all fairness," he said, "it isn't a lot of money for sheet metal. But it got enough scraps to build the entire shell of a ship."

"And what about all the parts that will make it work?" Web asked. "An engine? Steering controls? Fuel? Not to mention the paint it will take to get this looking like…" She waved a paw.

"A pyukumuku," said Annie.

The skuntank shrugged and looked back up at Waveform.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," he said. "While the rest of you are building this ship, I'll keep hunting pirates. We'll hopefully have enough for the remaining parts before too long."

"You've said a billion times that space pirates don't just fall out of the sky!" said Web. "What about the necessities? You can't keep wasting all those credits on a toy that might not even fly!"

"Oh, it's not a toy," said Annie.

Web turned her large head to face the human. "Annie, could you please go inside and see what Trojan is up to?"

Annie shrugged. "Sure. Maybe he'll let me see what designs he's come up with."

Web watched the human stroll into the house, then look around as though she'd lost her way before finally finding the stairs. Web turned back to Waveform who was once again rifling through the tatty sheet metal.

"Waveform, I think we made a huge mistake taking in a human," she said.

"Really? Because I think it was a fantastic decision," he said.

"I can't tell if you're being sarcastic or not."

"I'm not being sarcastic." He straightened then glided down to the ground with one silent beat of his wings. "It was just what we needed to get a jump start on dealing with Socket."

"What is your issue with the Mayor?" Web asked. "The environmental conditions don't even directly concern you. You could easily be living in luxury inside Gear Village yet for some reason you choose to live in the slums hunting down space pirates!"

He said nothing as he tossed a stray, and somewhat heavy, sheet of metal back onto the heaving pile. It teetered precariously at the top

before sliding into place with a sound like claws on a chalkboard.

"Seriously, Waveform. What is it? You've always been shrouded in mystery and I think it's about time you told us what's going on before dragging us - and a child! - into your ominous plans."

"That water dweller doesn't need to come with us," said Waveform.

"But he wants to," said Web. "And the last I heard, Trojan was designing him a pair of legs! He's much too young to have mechanical enhancements!"

She watched with despair as Waveform dragged the skip on its creaking wheels towards their home's rickety gate.

"Oh, where are you taking all that?" she asked with exasperation.

"What? You think I'm leaving this on the street?" he scoffed.

She opened her mouth to speak, but instead she shook her head and sighed. Leaving it on the street would certainly solve her problems. Or delay them. But it would certainly be a waste of three and a half thousand credits.

"Fine," she said. "Lock it in the back garden. Maybe it will rain and finish off rusting it all away."

The decidueye snorted and turned his back on her, dragging the skip behind him effortlessly.

"Do you really think we can trust her?" she asked.

He paused by the gate and fixed his vermilion eyes on hers. "You're the one who let her into our home."

"It was pity," she said. "Besides… I can't decide if she's unwell or if all humans are a bit loopy."

"Oh, she's unwell."

He turned away from her again and pushed the gate open, dragging the rattling skip behind him.

"How do you know that?" she asked. "You've never met a human before. None of us have."

He said nothing. Her only answer came in the slam of the gate, splintering around its already worn hinges.

She shook her head again and dragged herself into the house. Between Annie and Waveform, her sanity was being plucked limb from screaming limb. A good hot cocoa was what she needed right now.

And a lie down.

…

Defrag sighed at her computer as she brought up yet another article on a potential 'monster' sighting. There were certainly a lot of them, most of them concentrated at the northern end of System Sky. Yet not one of them matched the description Tracer had shown her of the human. Either winged, looking every bit like an archeops; or gangly and ape-like with very little fur.

These sightings, however, looked nothing like either. Neither winged nor gangly. Each sighting described a creature that resembled a tentacruel or tentacool, or even frillish in some descriptions. Part of her deeply wondered if Tracer had been wrong. Maybe the human had more than one pokemon form, and the second was aquatic, and not an extinct pokemon at all.

Or maybe it was. An extinct pokemon they knew nothing or very little about. Jellyfish pokemon didn't have skeletons. They didn't fossilize. There was every possibility that a prehistoric pokemon could have been terrorizing the northern most point of System Sky, then vanishing back into the darkness.

But there was no ocean in System Sky. So this monster's presence made no sense. Were there flying jellyfish?

She pursed her lips together as she skimmed over the article, all of it information she had already read elsewhere. Attacks on the northern cities. Three pokemon dead from toxic stab wounds. Her eyes trailed down to the related news headlines below.

'Jellyfish attacks Favicon City. Is this the water dwellers' revenge?'

She mouthed the words as she selected the headline. Once again, it was all news she'd read before. Favicon City was one of two that had been attacked, and sported two casualties. But this time, something else accompanied the article.

A photograph.

The blurred picture looked every bit like a jellyfish, but she wouldn't have said it looked like any pokemon she was aware of. It had twelve tentacles of varying length on either side of its body, in perfect symmetry. Two at the sides and two at its 'rear' were longer than the others. Almost gangly… was this actually the human?

She stared at it, trying to work out whether or not it fit the description - and somewhat crude drawing - that Tracer had left her with. (Due to confidential reasons, he hadn't wanted to leave a screen shot of the CCTV footage.) It didn't remotely fit. It didn't even match her mental image of it. Yet there was something oddly human-like about it.

She ran a paw over one of her long ears as she stared transfixed at the odd jellyfish. No. It wasn't the human. This was something else. Something more threatening than a creature from another world assaulting the mayor.

Whatever it was, it was attacking System Sky.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 31

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Thirty One

The sun was well into setting as Macro and Anchor skulked by the orchard. Macro had resorted to hiding himself inside a razz berry bush, and much to his irritation the tiny thorns kept catching in his fur and the leaves clung to his sticky scarf.

"Can you hear anything?" he asked.

Anchor grunted. "Yeh. You."

Macro tutted and turned his violet eyes back onto the iron gate. There was no sign of grass pokemon beyond it. They'd long since retired to their tents, hidden out of sight. Or maybe they'd left Cyan City. If they'd left… then that meant they'd took the children with them.

The mawile pushed himself out of the bush and plucked thorns from his thick fur. He never took his eyes off the gate. Slowly he crept towards it, and the bush behind him rustled as Anchor climbed out from it. Macro threw his back up against the wall and drew his laser. He didn't know if he'd need it, but having it ready would save vital time. And lives.

He strained his ears, but not a whisper came from beyond the wall. Carefully, he edged closer to the gate. The branches were motionless, but in the rapidly dimming light he could see a lone caterpillar pokemon - a caterpie or a sewaddle going off the colour - dozing amongst the lush leaves of a sitrus tree. So they slept? It made sense, given DL's need to sleep. But he hadn't expected it. He'd expected a horde of ravenous, untiring, empty caterpillars munching their way through Cyan City's food supply. He didn't even

know if they could evolve. If they could, the consequences could be disastrous.

He turned his eyes back onto the orchard, searching frantically for any sign of the grass army amongst the shrubs and trees.

Nothing.

"Can't see a thing in this light," he snorted.

"Yeh," said Anchor quietly. "It would be a lot easier if I'd remembered my heat tracker."

"You don't have it?" Macro saw Anchor shake his head. The mawile rolled his eyes. "Moron."

Something warm fell on his shoulder and his mouth flew open, releasing an involuntary scream. It echoed around the square and his eyes flew to his assailant.

Lossy stood stock still behind him, her black eyes impossibly wide. Her sleek fur bristled like a brush and she stared at him, her breath coming in quick bursts.

Anchor stood behind her, his eyes and ears trained on the orchard. Macro followed his gaze while trying to calm his racing heart.

Silence.

Where was the grass army?

"I'm sorry," Lossy whispered. "I… wanted to know if you wanted… somewhere to sleep."

Macro slapped his paw into his face and groaned. This dewott was going to be the death of him.

Sleep wasn't a bad idea, but if the grass army was sleeping then now was a good time to sneak into their camp and rescue the twins.

He rounded on the dewott and flashed his canines.

"I don't want sleep," he hissed. "Now let me do my job."

She snatched her paw back and clutched it to her chest. With a curt nod, she took a step away from him, and her eyes flitted to the orchard.

"And go home," Macro added as he turned back to the gate. "I don't want you slowing me down by getting yourself caught."

"I can't," she said. "It feels so…"

She glanced over her shoulder at the apartment blocks and her eyes welled with tears.

Macro sighed and shook his head. "Fine. Then stay hidden somewhere. Sleep in a bush or something."

He turned to the gate and reached into his pouch for his lock pick. Another scan of the orchard beyond confirmed there were no nearby grass types. His pick flew expertly into the lock and within seconds it flicked open with a loud snap. The gate creaked open on its hinges under his paws, creating an ear-splitting screech that made him freeze in his tracks.

The caterpillar pokemon nearby raised its head and looked around. Macro braced himself for the wretched thing to let off an alarm, but instead it moved towards the nearest sitrus berry like a magnet to metal.

He let out the breath he'd been holding and squirmed through the narrow gap the gate had left him. Then he shot into the nearest bush like a dart.

Silence.

The orchard was oddly silent, almost eerie. Nothing but a slight breeze could be heard, rustling through the branches of the trees

and stirring the leaves. The rustling sounded like the flapping of hundreds of wings, and each gust sent a chill down Macro's spine. He leapt as the gate creaked open to allow Anchor inside. The granbull's pink body was visible through the bush's branches, but he didn't join Macro in the bush. Instead he skulked beside it, sniffing the air. Macro could tell by the way he was snuffling that he'd picked up on something.

He reached for his laser and his arm brushed across cool, damp leaves and they shifted beneath his touch. He froze and looked down at his right, his breath still in his throat. What he'd dismissed as wind became more apparent that it was the soft, deep breathing of a sleeping pokemon. Almost invisible amid the foliage, the sleeping ivysaur's ribs rose and fell with each deep breath.

Macro didn't know much about grass type pokemon. Some were definitely nocturnal, such as oddish. But most needed to photosynthesise as well as consume berries. With no sun to warm their leaves and, in the case of the ivysaur, blood, then it would be unlikely that they'd be awake. If he was correct, then that explained the leafy reptile's hiding.

Macro took a deep, steadying breath and reversed out of the bush, not taking his eyes off the ivysaur. As his feet touched soft grass, he finally let out the breath and looked up at Anchor. The granbull raised an eyebrow at him then turned back to the orchard. Macro swallowed dryly and trotted around the bush to join his side, keeping a paw clasped over the butt of his laser.

"There's an ivysaur in that bush," he whispered.

Anchor looked down at him with a start, then over at the bush his captain had just scurried from. His nose twitched again as he sniffed the air, then he scratched it with a broad claw.

"It makes me wonder how many are left here," Macro whispered as he looked up at the branches. "Because this orchard was teaming with grass types earlier on."

His heart pounded. Any one of those bushes or shrubs could be attached to an unsuspecting and invisible pokemon. He was fortunate enough he only ran into an occupied berry bush. If he'd taken up refuge in a tangrowth's vines, he'd be crushed half to death by now.

He tapped Anchor with the barrel of his gun. "Let's find those twins."

Soft grass rustled beneath their paws as they pressed their way through the orchard. Macro paused beside each bush, carefully analyzing it before pulling aside the branches. Every one he checked was nothing more than a razz or bluk berry bush, but most of them contained one or two sleeping pokemon. Mostly chikorita and bayleaf. One bush even contained a leafeon.

He paused beside a massive orchid to check it for any small, sneaky grass types and his breath caught in his throat as his eyes trailed up it. It was no flower. Closer inspection revealed it to be bug-like, but it was also no bug. Long, petal-like limbs folded neatly over equally petal-like legs. Yet he knew full well those 'petal-like limbs' were as deadly as a scyther's scythes. The lurantis slept soundly, its antennae twitching at every sound. He desperately hoped it wouldn't wake up. He had nothing in his arsenal to deal with grass pokemon, let alone something as volatile as a lurantis.

Anchor ushered him on with a paw on his back and Macro tore himself away from the dangerous grass pokemon. Every step felt like he was treading on egg shells. Three tiny cherubi sat huddled beneath a cheri tree. Clever. Very clever. Beside the cheri tree slept the torterra he'd seen earlier. In its branches lay a roselia, while a tropius slept beneath it. How had he missed all this from outside the orchard? Now he knew they were there, they were as clear as day.

Almost half way around the orchard, and he'd seen no sign of the oshawott twins. No sign of a tent. He bit back the urge to call out for them. That would be suicide, and would likely also result in the death of those kids.

The two pirates froze as something caught their eye. Movement to their left. Beside a tangled bush Macro guessed to be a tangela sat two squat pokemon. An oddish and a gloom. Both were deeply involved in a game of chess. Each piece was lit up green as they floated over the holoscreen of a pocket computer. Macro tutted under his breath. The night watch. It had been too easy to skulk about the orchard unseen. If those two were awake, then they were probably guarding something. The twins? He could hope so. But with the size of their army, he couldn't exactly go in guns blazing.

He nodded to Anchor and trotted towards the shadows of a tree, carefully checking they were vacant first. A quick survey of the branches confirmed their safety and he pressed his back against it while keeping one eye on the oddish and gloom.

Anchor joined his side and folded his arms as he frowned at the two pokemon.

"Any ideas?" he asked Macro quietly. "'Cos we've dealt with large armies before, but nothing to this scale."

Macro bit his lip. "I'll be honest… I'm seriously rethinking my method."

Anchor jerked his head to look down at him. "You are?"

"We can't deal with this alone," said Macro. "You've seen the size of them. They're perfectly camouflaged."

"They wake up, they'll be sluggish," said Anchor.

"Sluggish or not, one stun spore and we're easy prey."

"Then what do you suggest we do?"

Macro sighed and threw a paw in the air. "Message Matrix. See if he has any ideas. Failing that…"

He trailed off, watching the two pokemon playing chess. Surrounded on all sides by a grass army he felt helpless. He could only remember two occasions he'd felt helpless. One, he was puny kid surrounded by a squad of dragon type pirates, desperate to defend his friend. The other… he hated even thinking about it.

No… he wasn't a helpless kid anymore. But those two oshawott were.

He took a step forward, reaching for his second gun. But before his paw reached it, something snaked its way around his wrist and up his arm. His eyes snapped to it, but the green tentacle wormed its way around his chest and tightened before it reached his throat. He turned to reach out to Anchor, but his paw faltered. The granbull was surrounded by green tentacles, leaving only his legs and eyes visible. The owner sat atop his head, its large green mouth spread in a grin peppered with long, green, bristle-like teeth.

A carnivine.

Macro's violet eyes narrowed into a leer.

The fly trap pokemon pulled him in towards him, slamming his back hard into the tree. A low purr came from deep within his throat and he moved his maw closer to the two pirates.

"You two have a fine set of sharp teeth," he said as he wrapped his vine around Macro's muzzle. "Now tell me. Is it just me, or should all water type pokemon be treated as water dwellers? I mean… they're the same, right? They need water to survive. Much more so than we do. And we've all gotta eat, so I say we just farm those berry-loving suckers."

The carnivine's words pushed bile up into Macro's throat and it took everything in his power to not bite down hard on his slimy vine.

"You agree with me, right?" The carnivine's voice was laced with venom. "Because why else would a pair of fairy type space pirates

be skulking around a berry orchard in Cyan City? Certainly not intervening with Luma City's plans, no, no, of course not. That would be… really… very… foolish." With every final word, his vines tightened, crushing his prey.

The carnivine's breath stunk of rotting meat. Macro feared he would be sick. He wriggled one of his paws to rotate his laser and pressed the trigger. Whatever laser was set didn't matter. It would be enough to startle the carnivine so they could break free of its wretched, strangling grip.

A flash of green sent Macro's heart plummeting. Grass. It was enough to sear the fly trap's dangling vines. Enough for his grip to loosen and for Anchor to break free. But Macro was snatched back into the carnivine's body to be entangled in a death grip. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of red as Anchor's canines lit up, but it went unnoticed by the grass pokemon. However, the flames only flickered briefly. A reflex. Anchor knew full well if he hit the carnivine with a fire attack it would harm his ally.

"So you are here to meddle in our plans," the carnivine hissed. "Well…" He paused to sniff Macro's head and chuckled. "Let's just say that little Hunter has become the hunted."

Anchor smashed his gauntlets together in a shower of sparks. The sound drowned out anything he said before he raised his fist and brought it down onto the carnivine's jaws. Acid leaked from his needle-like teeth and splattered over Macro's fur, acting as a conductor to carry the sparks over his own body.

The mawile tugged the stunned vines free and staggered from his grip. His entire body tingled as electricity coursed through him and he struggled to catch his breath. Each one came in a raspy burst and he rubbed a paw over his scar to try and get some feeling back in his face.

Anchor lunged past him, snapping his canines down onto the carnivine in a torrent of flames. The orchard lit up red and orange for

a brief second before the flames fizzled out.

The carnivine lay in a heap of sparking, smoldering vines, each one twitching like a sack full of rattata kits.

"I think…" Macro's voice croaked and he cleared his throat. "I think I'm gonna stick with what I said earli-"

A cloud of dust engulfed him, choking off his sentence, and he collapsed to the floor. His eyes remained open long enough to see the oddish rush Anchor, only to be met with his sparking gauntlet and sent rolling through the sky like a shuttlecock.

…

Wallpaper peeled off the wall, blackening in the intense heat. Hot flames licked at Macro's fur and thick, black smoke curled up and filled his senses. His body shook as he choked, forcing himself to his feet. There wasn't a drop of moisture in the small room. Even his mouth felt bone dry, and his eyes stung. But somewhere, there was sobbing. A child… trapped in the deadly flames.

The only door sat beyond the ring of fire, as black as the heavy smoke. His only option was the window. Somehow, the ring of flames hadn't reached it. It was as if they were being held back by some invisible force.

He made a beeline for it, but before his paws touched the window sill, that sobbing intensified into a panicked screech.

Of course… the twins!

He snapped his head around to focus on it. Beyond the flames, he saw a movement. Someone sat huddled in the corner, small and pale. As they looked up, they fixed a pair of chocolate eyes on his.

No…

He pushed himself back from the window, searching the room for a way through. There was no way he was leaving her.

The antennae behind the pachirisu's ear began to flash between blue and orange and her paw flopped onto the dry ground. One word flew from her mouth, sounding oddly warped.

"Jump."

He stood watching her. Watching as the antennae blinked from orange to red and those chocolate eyes slowly closed. He shook his head, bracing himself to run through the flames. There was no way he was leaving her. She wasn't going to die in this furnace. But his feet fought to move forwards as something pulled him towards the window.

He turned to face it, to fight back, but light blinded him. A strange, soothing light. The heat from the flames cooled as they were forced back, and he felt himself dragged from the window.

Green grass rushed up to greet him, faster and faster. It spread out like a mattress, curling and coiling into a fluffy green cloud.

Macro sat bolt upright, launching the suffocating duvet across the bed. His heart was racing and he looked around the tiny room. No flames. No grass. No blinding light. But once again, that odd sun-like dazzle spot occupied his vision, distorting the blue cheri blossom wallpaper.

His duvet shifted and he snapped back to it, reaching for his laser. It fell away from its heap to reveal Anchor's surprised face, and he looked at Macro with a twinkle of amusement.

"Aren't you too old for night terrors, Cap'n? 'Cos I always thought pokemon grew out of them as they got older."

Macro rubbed the base of his horn and frowned. "I don't have night terrors."

"Well, it were somethin' nasty." Anchor folded the duvet back onto the bed. "You were screamin' DL's name before you woke up."

Macro's face heated up and he diverted his gaze to the closed door. His paw absently rubbed at his arm. Despite the dry heat in his dream, his fur was sopping wet. His heart was also still racing.

He turned back to Anchor and cleared his throat. "What happened? Where are we?"

"You got doused with spore and it put you into a right deep sleep." Anchor retrieved the magazine he was reading which Macro noted was about orchard care. "After I wiped the floor with those two night watchers I carried you back to Lossy's apartment, since you were in no fit state to fight."

Macro frowned and his claws wound into the bed sheet. "We were in a berry orchard! Just force a chesto berry down my throat!"

Anchor snorted and looked up at him. "Can't say the idea didn't cross my mind, but what was to stop them tossing another spore our way? Grass types are tricky, Cap'n. You were right. We need more pokemon to take them down and rescue the kids. Hopefully that oddish and gloom don't rat us out, but that's a golden dream right there. Those twins could already be in trouble, especially if they think they're what we were after."

Macro muttered under his breath and slipped from the bed. A flicker of light caught his eye and he span towards the window. Light blue curtains billowed in the gentle breeze.

"It's daylight?!" He turned on the spot to face Anchor.

"Aye," said the granbull without looking up from whatever article he was reading. "You slept the entire night."

"Why couldn't you have woken me?!"

"Spore." Anchor shrugged. "Besides. I think you needed the sleep, if I'm honest. Not to mention we need a plan."

Macro sighed and closed his eyes. Of course. They did need a plan. Two lone space pirates running into an army camp guns blazing was the epitome of a suicide mission.

Unfortunately, he didn't know enough pokemon who would be willing to help him.

The door opened and Lossy stood in the corridor rubbing her paws together. Her face was pale beneath her white fur and her eyes were bloodshot.

"There's been another incident," she said. "Cyan City's army have apprehended a fire type pokemon. It looks like… the grass army might have formed an alliance."

"Unlikely," said Macro. "You might have just found a stray. The three of you are at war, after all."

She shook her head. "I don't know. They found the talonflame flying over the orchard where you found that caterpie."

Macro's eyes widened and Anchor dropped his magazine.

"Talonflame?" they asked in unison.

"Yes," she said. "They're holding him in the cells. What are we going to do?"

Macro exchanged glances with Anchor and the granbull stood up.

"You think it's Switch?" Anchor asked.

"If it is," said Macro, "I'm gonna kick his feathered tush all the way back to Wildcard Gamma."

He made for the door and Lossy stood aside to let him past.

"You might know him?" she gasped.

He looked back over his shoulder. "There's a fair chance I do. And if it's who I think it is, he's meant to be recovering on my ship. Did they say if he was injured?"

"Yes, but they think it was from their battle."

"That cinches it then." Macro waved a paw at her and marched down the corridor. "I'm gonna go get him. Where's this holding place?"

"At the police station," she said. "But erm…"

He paused and his ears twitched as she sniffed a couple of times.

"I think," she said slowly, "that you should have a little shower first."

He looked down at his fur, still damp from his nightmare. His drying fur was definitely beginning to let off quite the doggy smell. With a sigh, he turned into the bathroom.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 32

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D Sorry it's a day late. I did try to update this yesterday, but there was an error on this site preventing me from doing so.

Chapter Thirty Two

There wasn't enough coffee in the whole of System to quell Annie's headache.

The constant clattering from down the hall had kept her awake most of the night, and she'd developed quite the banger as a result. She lay sprawled on the table in a mass of feathers and irritation, watching the long fluffy purple skuntank tail as it swished back and forth while Web clattered around the kitchen. The sound was like a marching band, striking away at tin drums. Annie clenched her sharp teeth together and clawed at her head, letting out a pitiful groan that oddly enough caused the skuntank to freeze on the spot and cast her a wary glance.

"Is everything okay?" Web asked.

"Just dandy," Annie hissed.

The skuntank watched her for a moment, then turned back to her task… at a much quieter pace. The sweet sickly scent of stewing overripe berries filled the air in a mist of steam, creating a sticky condensation over the yellow windows.

Annie closed her eyes, feeling herself begin to drift off into a light doze. But she was rudely awakened by yet more clattering, followed by a shrill excitable voice. Her eyes snapped back open and she raised her head to berate the noise-maker.

A happy, gold and white face beamed at her from the doorway. Zip floated in a glass bowl, held up on a metal frame. Three long,

mechanical legs spread out at even angles from beneath the bowl, while inside the water in a rubber shell was a steering stick. If she removed the mechanical components, the bowl wasn't entirely dissimilar to the kind humans kept their aquatic pokemon in when they weren't inside their pokeballs. In all fairness, it was rather small. Not much exercise space.

Zip didn't appear to mind this, however, as he nudged the stick forward and the legs skittered across the floor with all the grace of a tap-dancing araquanid with three left feet.

"Look at me!" he squealed. "I have legs! I'm a land pokemon now!"

"Now, now." Web turned towards him and placed her paws on her hips. "You might well be on land, but you're still a water dweller. I won't have any accidents while you're trying to find your land legs. Calm down in that thing."

Zip skidded to a halt and beamed at the skuntank. She returned his smile and waved a paw.

"Darn it, kid. Can't resist that smile." She turned back towards the stove. "Join us at the table and I'll dice you up some berries."

The goldeen cheered and turned his device towards the table. The long mechanical legs flailed at a seat, and he teetered dangerously backwards. Deciding to give up, the bowl lurched forwards, sloshing water onto the floor. He shoved the chair to one side, its feet screeching on the floor and echoing around Annie's pounding head. Zip gave the archeops a beaming smile and waved a fin.

"Good morning!" he quipped.

Annie grunted and propped herself on a wing-elbow while she swigged at her scalding coffee. It took every ounce of restraint she had to resist pouring it into the kid's bowl.

"Not a morning 'mon?" Zip asked.

She snorted and took a smaller sip. "On days like this, I can't stand anyone."

"Tell me about it." Waveform slumped into the seat beside her and shot the goldeen a glare as he eyed his contraption. "So it was you making all that racket?"

Zip's smile fell and he sank to the bottom of his bowl. "I'm sorry… but at least now I'm more helpful to you, right?"

The decidueye shrugged and reached across the table for the newspaper. "I suppose. It certainly beats carrying you around."

Web craned her neck around to eye the three pokemon. "Where's Trojan? He never misses breakfast."

"Probably sleeping," said Waveform.

"Aye, he said he wanted some rest," said Zip. "We were up most of the night!"

"So was I," Annie scoffed.

Waveform grunted and shook the newspaper open.

"You could always go back to bed," said Web. "No one is forcing you to stay awake."

"Sod that," said Annie. "If I go back to bed, my whole sleeping pattern is gonna go to whack. And that's gonna help no one in this… what was I running again?"

"A rebellion," said Waveform.

"Oh yeh, that." Annie slumped forwards and groaned. "It feels like there's a rock slide in my head."

Waveform let out a gasp and the newspaper almost fell out of his wing fingers. Annie looked up at him with a start, which she regretted

as she placed a claw on the side of her head.

"Hey, it ain't that bad," she told him. "It's just a migraine."

"Not that." Waveform waved her off and lowered the newspaper to the table. "This. There's been some… beast thing… attacking Favicon City."

"Favicon?" Annie scratched her head and looked up at the ceiling. "Think I had one of those when I was a kid."

She followed one of the decidueye's fingers to a blurry photograph. Some blob-like thing hovered in the air above a skyscraper, its tentacles reducing the formerly splendid building to rubble while pokemon ran for their lives.

"You know what?" she said. "Some people really have nothing better to do than stand around watching a disaster taking photographs, do they?"

The owl pokemon fixed her in a glare.

Web crept behind Annie to look over her shoulder, and Zip's mechanical feet trotted over the floor as he joined them around the newspaper.

"What is that thing?" Web asked. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Looks like a tentacruel," said Zip. "But… they can't fly."

"It looks like a hoax photo to me," said Annie. "A convincing one. But until I can see what that thing is, I'm sayin' nothin'."

"The descriptions they have," said Waveform, "liken it to a tentacruel or frillish. But it apparently has no face to speak of, and is a silvery colour."

"Is it 'mon made?" Web asked.

"Witnesses said it looked organic. It was last sighted heading south-east from Favicon City."

Web's paws fell to her sides and she glanced out of the window.

"They say at the speed it was traveling, it could be at Meta City within three days," Waveform went on.

Annie looked up at Web and shrugged. "Wouldn't worry. By then our ship should be built, right? Besides, is it really gonna wanna live in this toxic swamp?"

Web said nothing as she wound her paws in her apron.

"You all right, Webber?" Waveform asked. "You've gone awfully quiet."

"It's heading towards pirate territory," she said quietly.

Waveform raised an eyebrow. "Well, you're not in Pulse City any more. We're here on System Ground." He sighed and retrieved his paper. "Besides. If they all bail on the place, they'll be easier to round up, won't they?"

She glanced at him and cleared her throat as she beat the creases out of her apron. "I guess."

Annie watched her as she strutted back over to the stove and idly stirred the steaming pot of berries.

"We could head it off," she said.

Waveform shot her a look out of the corner of his eye, and Web's spine stiffened. She looked back at Annie with a look of concern.

"Head it off?" she asked.

Annie nodded slowly, if only to avoid jiggling her aching head. "Yeh. We'll get that ship built and shoot that… blob thing… out of the sky."

"I wouldn't be so hasty," said Waveform. "Not only are space pirates never to be trusted, that ship of ours is never going to be up in the air in less than three days let alone enough time to head it off at Pulse City."

Annie gave him a sly smile. "You underestimate me, Mister Form."

Waveform dropped his paper and looked down at her with an unreadable expression, and a snicker came from the stove.

Annie slipped from the table with her coffee mug clasped tightly in her right claws. She sipped at it as she waddled from the room towards the stairs.

"Wait for me!" Zip skittered from the room.

"What about your berries?" Web called after him.

"Later! I'm needed to build this ship!"

The two remaining pokemon watched them leave, and Waveform let out a long sigh.

"She's got pretty high expectations," he said.

"And you want to start a rebellion with her," said Web. "I suppose there's worse captains, eh?"

"Oh, she won't be captain," said Waveform.

"I'd be wary of challenging her. I think she'd put up the fight. Besides." Web placed her paws on her hips and smirked. "You'd probably end up with a high rank regardless. She seems to have taken a shine to you."

Waveform raised an eyebrow and his beak fell open before twisting into a confused frown.

Web chuckled again and turned back to the stove. "Eat your berries, Mister Form."

…

The police station was ablaze with chaos. Crowds of water pokemon surrounded it, their voices mashing together in a crescendo as they demanded the talonflame be done away with. The look of fire behind millions of eyes made Macro visibly bristle.

He began to march towards the crowd, but Anchor grabbed the scruff of his scarf and tugged him backwards.

"Don't be hasty, Cap'n," he said. "That crowd will have your neck."

Macro glanced up at him and brushed dried string-shot from his scarf. It flaked away beneath his paw but left an unsightly grey residue.

"Then what do you suggest we do?" he asked. "That crowd is huge. We can't even get close enough to the station let alone inside it without being seen."

"I have an idea."

Macro almost leapt out of his skin. He fixed Lossy with a raised eyebrow and looked from the heaving crowd to the dewott and back.

"You have an idea?" he snorted.

She nodded slowly. "You have a huge bounty on your head. I could pretend to be apprehending you and get you through that crowd."

"And who's to say they won't tear your head off to get his?" Anchor nodded at the mawile.

"That's a rather morbid metaphor, Anchor," Macro muttered.

Anchor folded his arms and grunted. "It made my point."

"Listen to me." Lossy wound her paws together, cowering slightly as she scrutinized the crowd. "Everyone in Cyan City knows each other. I doubt they'd try to hurt me, or cause a fuss as I get you through. I can't speak for everyone, though, so I know it's a risk, but…"

Anchor sighed and rubbed his snout. "It's all we've got. I'm with the dewott."

Macro rolled his eyes and tried to smooth out his creased and unsightly scarf. "All right. Get us through, before they end up roasting Switch or something."

"It would increase my chance of getting you there successfully if I used one of your lasers against you," she said.

Macro's spine stiffened and he fixed Lossy with a glare. "I'm sorry?"

"Everyone knows you have a grass laser," she explained. "That crowd is full of water type pokemon. They'd be even more unlikely to start anything if they thought I'd shoot them with it."

Macro frowned. "But you're a meek little dewott."

"I'm also a mother. I'd do anything to get my babies back, and everyone here knows they've been taken now. It's all over the papers."

Macro rolled his eyes and let his paws drop to his sides. "Fine."

He stuffed one of his lasers into her paw, the action alone leaving him feeling breathless as though someone had taken one of his lungs. As the cold nozzle touched his back his blood turned to ice and he instinctively raised both his paws.

"Move," she said softly.

Macro kept one eye over his shoulder as he slowly walked towards the crowd. Anchor kept steady pace at his sides until he came to a sudden stop and looked down at his paws.

"You're probably gonna wanna hold onto these," he said, removing his gauntlets.

The dewott took them gingerly and tucked them under one arm. Despite the determined look on her face, she staggered slightly under their weight. Regardless, she pressed Macro forwards with the nozzle of the laser.

The mawile bit his tongue, reluctant to voice his discomfort. Was this really just an act? The look in her eyes and the pressure of his laser against his spine certainly made him doubtful.

Hundreds of eyes shot their way as they approached the crowd. Leers and scowls fixed on the space pirates, then traveled over to Lossy and her threatening laser. Her assumption was correct. Pokemon stepped back and parted to let her through, but not without the green flash of envy.

Macro resisted the urge to meet their eyes. More so because he was scared they'd see fear behind them. His pulse was racing, and it only worsened with every nudge from his own weapon.

The police station loomed before them, and the taut face of a blastoise leered down at them. When he spotted Lossy and the laser, his muzzle twisted into a sneer.

"Turning in the pokemon who were apparently 'helping' you?" he scoffed. "Trusting filth like that…"

"Just let me see Governor Jumper," she said bluntly.

"He's busy with the talonflame," said the blastoise. "Besides, what makes you think I'm gonna let you march in there with an armed laser?"

"If I remove it, he'll use the other one against me and run," she said.

The blastoise's eyes locked onto Macro's for a painfully long second. Then his large paw stretched down towards him and he wagged a claw.

With a sigh, Macro reached to his right holster and plonked his laser into the blastoise's calloused paw. His trusty weapon looked tiny as it was whisked away, leaving him feeling helpless. He reminded himself over and over he didn't need his lasers. He was more than capable of dealing with other pokemon with his own attacks. He'd dealt with threats the size of the blastoise officer. He'd even thrown them.

"If I hand over this one," Lossy said after she'd handed the blastoise Anchor's gauntlets, "he might still fight back. My aquatic attacks won't do anything to him."

"Then I'll take him through," the blastoise said with a smile, but Macro could see the smirk hidden behind it.

Lossy wasn't exactly blind either. Her tiny nose creased and the butt of the laser clicked as she tightened her grip. Macro's fur stood on end and he gave her a wary glance. One misfire and she'd blow a hole in his torso.

"Fine." The blastoise sighed and threw the door wide open. "Make it quick."

Macro staggered forwards as Lossy jabbed him in the spine. Biting back a remark, he strutted towards the door. He caught a sneer from the tortoise pokemon before it slammed shut behind him, drowning out the ruckus from the crowd.

Macro glanced back at the dewott. "Okay. We're inside. You can put my laser down now."

She jabbed it into his back once more and he flinched, almost jogging along the corridor. He looked up at Anchor with wide, pleading eyes, and mouthed the words 'help me'. The granbull gave

him an apologetic shake of the head and kept pace beside him as Lossy marched them towards Jumper's office.

The office door was shut, and Macro found himself sandwiched between it and his laser as Lossy leant over him to knock politely. His muzzle crinkled as he shot her a sideways leer at the sheer irony.

"Come in," came Jumper's muffled voice.

She pushed the door open and marched the two pirates ahead of her. The frogadier was sat beside a floatzel, and the governor's expression switched from frustration to confusion to surprise then did a full loop back to frustrated. He cleared his throat and sat back in his seat, while the floatzel reluctantly discarded the paperwork he'd been slaving over.

"What is this?" The floatzel waved a paw at the two space pirates.

"It looks like two pirates didn't leave the city when I told them to," said Jumper. "What a foolish mistake."

The floatzel leant towards him and muttered, "Governor, I hate to question you-"

"If you wouldn't mind," said Jumper, "could you leave me to deal with this for a few minutes?"

The floatzel reluctantly rose to his feet and left the room, pausing to fire Macro a disapproving sneer. Once the door had closed - well, slammed - Jumper turned back to the pirates and a painful silence washed over the office.

"I thought I told you two that you could leave safely provided it was before nightfall." His eyes snapped onto Macro. "Clearly you didn't listen."

Macro folded his arms and shrugged. "I think you'll find we just didn't do it."

"You know what I think?" Jumper leant forwards on the desk and steepled his paws together. "I think you should watch your mouth while you're at the mercy of your own gun."

Macro glanced back at Lossy over his shoulder. "We're in. You can put it down now."

The dewott's paw trembled, but she kept the laser pressed into his spine. Her eyes were fixed on the frogadier, sparkling with tears.

"Do you think…" Her voice cracked and she visibly restrained herself from looking at the two pirates. "Do you think the grass army would trade them for my children?"

Macro's jaw almost hit the floor. Every word that popped into his head came out of his mouth as a strangled gasp, and his violet eyes flew to the dewott with stunned accusation.

"After all we've done for you?!" he roared.

"You didn't get them back," she whimpered. "I want my babies!"

"We're supposed to be here to clear Switch's name, not sever my head!"

Jumper was oddly silent as he watched the three pokemon. He leant his chin on his steepled paws and looked at each of them in turn. Finally, he let out a sigh and sat back in his seat.

"To be honest, Lossy," he said, "I understand your suggestion, but I highly doubt this army of grass types would see forty thousand credits a good substitution for bringing an end to an entire city. It might seem a lot of money to an individual, but it doesn't go far."

The dewott's arm slackened and she let the gun fall to her side. Her eyes went to the floor and her shoulders shook with sobs.

In one fluid motion, Macro snatched his gun from her grip and popped it safely into his holster. The weight sent a wave of relief through him and he let out a satisfied sigh. It was swiftly washed away when he met the frogadier's cold eyes, freezing him to the spot.

"You said you want to clear someone's name?" Jumper paused and tapped his paw on the table. "I sincerely hope you don't mean that talonflame…"

"Why not?" Macro asked. "I thought it would be a relief to you to learn that the grass army aren't liaising with Magenta City."

"No, but it would mean that yet another space pirate has invaded Cyan City."

Macro folded his arms and smirked. "Switch ain't a space pirate. He's a client."

Anchor leant towards him and whispered in his ear. "Don't give too much away, Cap'n."

"I ain't stupid, Anchor."

"I think you'll find my hearing is impeccable," said Jumper. "But, I guess locking an innocent pokemon behind bars is a crime in itself. If you can vouch that this talonflame is not in any way associated with the grass army's invasion, then I suppose I can let you meet him."

The frogadier rose and marched passed them towards the door. Macro watched him move, but his eyes met Lossy's and his fur bristled like a ferroseed. He grit his teeth together and waved a clenched paw.

"Tryin' to trade my life!" he barked.

Lossy stiffened and took a step back, her eyes going to the door. "I'm sorry! I… I just want-"

"I don't want to hear it," Macro hissed.

Jumper cleared his throat. "Excuse me. But there'll be no fighting here. Lossy, you are free to go. You two." He pointed at Macro and Anchor. "You come with me."

Macro watched the dewott skulk off, then followed Jumper out of his office. The frogadier paused to lock up then gestured for the two space pirates to follow him down the narrow corridor.

"We caught him early this morning," said Jumper. "He was flying over the city just before dawn. One of my officers shot him out of the sky with a water pulse, and he appears to have injured his wing in the fall."

"If it's Switch, he didn't hurt it when he fell," said Macro. "Unless he landed awkwardly. He hurt himself in a battle with a steelix in Raster Town."

"What on earth were you doing in Raster Town?" Jumper looked back with some surprise then shook his head and waved a paw. "Never mind. I don't think I want to know."

He paused at another door and unlocked it. It led into another corridor lined with cells. Each one was closed off with a sheet of shock resistant plexi-glass. Scowling faces, most of which belonged to water types, leered back at them. Macro counted three prisoners, separated by empty cells, until they came to the one containing a talonflame. The disgruntled bird sat huddled in a corner, and his yellow eyes lit up when he saw the space pirates.

"Macro!"

"Macro?" Jumper looked down at the mawile.

The space pirate said nothing as he watched Switch skitter across the floor to reach the glass.

"I thought I was done for!" the talonflame gasped. "They think I'm assisting some army with an invasion!"

Macro frowned and tapped his claws along his arm. "You're supposed to be on my ship. What about your wing?"

"I'm fine, honestly!" The way Switch held his left wing didn't spell 'fine'. "I whacked it a bit when I fell. Anyway, Matrix sent me."

Macro slammed his paw into his face. "Why would he send a wounded pokemon?!"

"I insisted," Switch said quickly. "Anchor sent message that he needed his heat tracker, and I came down here to deliver it. But… well… it was confiscated."

Macro exchanged glances with Anchor and sighed. "If you'd just remembered to bring it yourself…"

Anchor shrugged. "I'm sorry, Cap'n. But I thought it would be necessary to help find those kids."

"We also wanted to confiscate his watch," said Jumper. "But when we tried, he had a panic attack. Convinced us it's a medical implement." He leant against the cell and fixed Anchor with a frown. "So the weapon belongs to you? I already told you this invasion is being dealt with. Cyan City's army is planning a line of defense, and those two oshawott will be rescued. I'm reluctant to say you can't leave after what you've done, but at this rate I fear you never will and I will have to contact Socket. Turn all three of you in."

"What?!" Switch almost collapsed with shock. "No! Please! I told you, I can help you!"

Jumper turned to Switch and shrugged. "If you're innocent, I'm sure she won't harm you."

Switch trembled from head to foot but he never took his eyes off the frogadier.

Macro's heart was in his throat. He raised a paw to get the governor's attention. "That won't be necessary. We'll finish what we came here for and be out of your fur."

"I don't have fur," said Jumper. "And besides. What makes you think you're getting your paws on that disk? I was informed it's confidential information. Leave, otherwise you'll face a lot worse than being turned over to Luma City."

The reminder of Lossy's threat chilled Macro to the core and he tore his eyes off the frogadier. His jaw tensed and one of his canines poked from his lips.

"I'm not goin' anywhere," he said. "I'm takin' that disk back. It doesn't belong to you, or Socket. As for you." He pointed a claw at Switch. "You're getting your feathered tush out of this city!"

Switch ruffled his feathers. "You think I'm leaving this place knowing there's an army here causing trouble that I can deal with very well?" He spread his wings, flinching slightly. "I already told them I can help but they won't believe me! Instead they now want to throw my life into Socket's paws!"

Jumper ran a paw down his face. "One fire and flying type isn't going to stand up against an entire army of grass types!"

"And neither is an army of water types! They'd wipe you out before you even stood a chance! I've spent years helping other pokemon, I know what I'm doing! Let me help!"

Anchor looked down at the flustered frogadier. "How long has this been goin' on?"

"Since morning," said Jumper.

"Years, eh?" Macro chuckled. "Interesting. Okay, how about this?" He turned to Jumper. "You take Switch's help, and loan Anchor and me a couple of flying lasers. We'll wipe this grassy threat off the face of Cyan City."

"And what makes you think we have weapons here?" Jumper asked. "We're under a weapon ban."

A small smirk tugged at Macro's lips. "How do you plan on taking on this army? 'Cos like Switch pointed out, they clearly have the upper paw."

Jumper's expression fell and he tapped his fingers on his arm rapidly. A small sigh flew out of his lips and he rolled his eyes.

"Fine. We're armed," he said. "Like I said, we can handle this."

Macro chuckled, then burst into fits of gleeful giggles. He fell into the glass and stretched out a paw to hold himself upright.

"A law breaker workin' inside the law!" he gasped. "I love it!"

Jumper narrowed his eyes dangerously. "I strongly suggest you stop that, Hunter, or you'll find yourself behind glass."

Macro took a few deep breaths to calm himself and stood with his back to the glass. He fixed his playful smirk on Jumper and grinned.

"I think we're at an impasse," he said. "You're holding weapons outside of Socket's knowledge, while we're trying to not be caught by her goons. You turn me in, I spill the beans. You let me do my thing, we tell no one and you're safe."

Jumper pursed his lips and stood silently analyzing the mawile. For a painful moment Macro really wished he could better read an opponents' motives.

"I don't like that," Jumper said suddenly. "I'm not going to just let you roam free and take government property. You've already gone

against my orders by staying here. If you want to 'do your thing' and escape with your lives, you can start by pulling your weight. I'll loan the two of you a flying module each and you can assist us in rescuing those twins and removing the threat from this city. Only then will I let you three go free, and only if the oshawott brothers are rescued unscathed."

Macro tutted and crossed his arms. "That's hardly fair. What if they've already harmed them? Ain't my fault."

"That is unavoidable," said Jumper. "But if they are harmed in the process of you rescuing them…"

Macro waved a paw. "Pish posh. We'll get them out. But my price for this job-"

"Is your life," said Jumper. "All three of your lives."

Macro's eye flew to the nervous talonflame. A few of his feathers had come loose and lay scattered on the ground.

"For the time being," said Jumper, "I'm going to put the two of you in your own cells. I have to run things by the tactical officer first. Make sure no one tries to earn themselves a quick credit by going after your bounty."

"You can assure that?" Macro asked.

"Of course. I'm the 'big cheese' here. My word is law until Socket overrules it." Before he unlocked the nearest empty cell, he turned to Macro and held out a paw. "Laser."

Reluctantly, Macro handed over his laser. Once again it left him feeling exposed and vulnerable. The cell door beside Switch opened and he was marched inside.

"Great," said Anchor. "This will be the first time someone's put me in a cell."

"Thank your stars it's only temporary," said Macro as he watched Jumper lock the glass door.

"So if we lose this…" came Switch's small voice. "What do we do? Flee?"

"There's a higher chance of us losing in battle than there is being turned over to Socket," said Anchor.

"You guys fret too much," Macro spat, sinking to the floor. "Don't worry, we got this."

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 33

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Thirty Three

If there was something Macro had learned from his short time in the the cell, it was two things. Firstly, prison food was disgusting. Secondly, the cells were oddly quiet.

Not a peep came from the other criminals locked inside them, but Macro wasn't sure how much of that was down to the glass muffling them out. Even Anchor's deep voice was slightly hindered by the cell's structure.

There hadn't been much to discuss, and Macro was finding himself growing increasingly restless. He paced back and forth with the taste of twice-fried potatoes and berry stew in his mouth, he tried to work out whether or not it was a trick. Was Jumper really going to use them to fight their battle, or was he secretly being turned over to Socket for his bounty?

He turned on the spot to march the other way for what must have been the hundredth time, but the ground moved beneath his feet, sending him half-running, half-falling across the cell. He landed face down on the tiled floor with an 'oomph', then as he looked up he became aware of a deep rumbling. The noise shook the very glass and he pushed himself up on his paws, straining his ears to pinpoint the noise.

Then it stopped as quickly as it had started.

The rumble was replaced by sirens and the roar of voices as their cell-mates tried to work out what had just happened.

One pair of red eyes fixed on him as the golduck opposite pushed himself to his knees. He rubbed a paw over his head and grimaced.

"Did you have somethin' to do with that?" he asked. "You sneaky pirates plant a bomb somewhere?"

"What makes you think I've done anything?" Macro placed a paw on his chest. "I'm stuck in this cell!"

"Could be liaising with the grass types," said the golduck. "I mean, you have a fire type ally! Who's to say you've not sided with both of them and are conspiring against us?"

"I agree." Macro couldn't see the speaker from where he was sat, but their voice was feminine. "They could have been hired. As far as I know, space pirates will do anything for a quick credit."

Macro flashed his canines and leapt towards the glass, pausing with both paws pressed up on it. He strained to see the speaker so he could bite back at them, but the door to the cells flew open, drawing all eyes towards them. Jumper's flat feet flapped on the floor as he quickly checked on each and every prisoner. Voices erupted again, each one warring to be heard over the other.

"What was that?!" Macro roared, echoing the same question everyone else had thrown at the frogadier.

He ran past them to check the rest of the cells before he finally trotted back, waving his paws.

"Silence!" he shouted.

The frantic voices ebbed out and Jumper cast Macro a sideways glance before turning to the rest of the cells.

"There's been an explosion," he said. "One of the store houses has been attacked. We're working on rescuing any survivors, but we believe it's the work of the grass army."

"A suicide bomber?" Anchor asked.

"We believe so," said Jumper. "But it's still too early to be certain."

"I reckon it were a space pirate," snorted the golduck.

Jumper ignored him and turned his attention to the swinging doors. "Sadly, I don't even think the police station will be safe for much longer. If this persists, we'll be sending you all down to Proxy Prison until this blows over."

As he left the cells, the locked up pokemon whined in protest.

Macro choked at the idea. Proxy City with it's putrid air… He could personally guarantee no one in this cell deserved that.

…

The setting sun painted the sky with an orange hue, reflecting off the discarded sheets of metal. They lay about the yard in a haphazard fashion, reminiscent of jagged teeth. Annie clutched a mug between two claws, trying not to spill it as she waddled out into the cold air.

Trojan sat astride the frame of their ship, hammering the scrap metal into shape around it. So the frame was complete. It was big, but not as big as she'd pictured it. If the frame was any indication, all of them could stand on top of it, which meant inside would be pretty cozy.

She sipped her coffee, watching the scrafty with a smirk.

"Looks good."

He leapt at her voice, almost falling off the frame. The hammer clattered to the concrete, bouncing then landing hard on one of the metal sheets. He cursed under his breath and slid from the ship, landing in a squat and pausing only to fire the archeops a leer.

"Zip said you were making progress," she said. "I have to admit, I had my doubts."

He snorted and snatched up the hammer. "What are you doing out here anyway? I came out here for some peace and quiet."

She stretched out her right wing claws. "I thought I could lend a hand."

"I don't need a 'hand'." He turned his back on her and clambered back up onto the frame. "Get back inside and start planning your rebellion strategy or something."

She pursed her lips together and watched as he began hammering away. The racket reignited her headache and for a moment she did consider going back into the house.

"You know what?" she said. "I feel like you're unhappy."

He froze, the hammer still held in mid-swing. His eyes narrowed as they locked onto her.

"You think I'm unhappy?" he said dangerously. "Well, what makes you think that?"

"You're moody," she said. "And I know a thing or two about being moody. I was takin' medication for it for years! I bit the doctor on more than one occasion. He told me that wasn't healthy, and for two months I had to wear a muzzle. But anyway, that was all this." She waved at her feathered form then shrugged. "I got a better handle on it. Wanna know how I did that?"

"Not really." He turned back to his work and brought the hammer down in three heavy swings.

Annie frowned and leant against the wall. "I'm gonna tell you anyway. I told myself, 'Annie, you need to stop biting the doctor. He's only trying to help.'"

Trojan turned to look at her slowly, his eyes narrowed but this time with curiosity and confusion. He let the hammer slide to the floor then cleared his throat.

"You're the doctor in this crazy scenario, aren't you?"

Annie sipped her coffee but she kept both eyes locked onto his.

"There's one difference here," he said. "I don't bite."

"You don't need to bite with teeth," she said. "You can bite with words, too."

He let out a long sigh and waved a dismissive paw. "Whatever. Pass me the hammer."

With a giggle of glee, Annie set her coffee mug down on the window sill. She scurried across the yard, almost scrambling on her wing claws, and retrieved the hammer. Trojan watched with amusement as she almost collapsed under its weight in a bid to lift it up to him.

Once it had been snatched from her claws, she flapped her wings to lift herself up onto the frame. By the time she was sat behind the scrafty she was breathless.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked between gasps.

Something above them fluttered and flew away with a noisy flap of wings, dragging the archeop's attention, but Trojan didn't seem to notice it.

"Go back inside and grab my diagram." He didn't even look back at her. "I think I left it on the kitchen table."

…

The thud of a soft body colliding with the window, followed by Defrag's squeak of surprise, made Tracer drop his cigar. He let out a sigh of exasperation and retrieved the burning stub before it set fire to the carpet.

Widget clambered out of his seat and went to open the window.

"What is it?" Tracer asked.

Limbs smacked at the concrete, followed by a lot of ranting and swearing. The eevee leant out of the window then dragged himself back inside, depositing a small zubat onto the carpet.

"Did… did someone just bite me?!" the zubat shrieked.

Tracer sighed again and looked down at the stunned bat.

"Java," he said slowly, "I thought I told you to enter via the mail box?"

"I missed it." The zubat twitched his right ear and grunted. "Echolocation is off."

The delphox scooped up the small zubat and set him down on the windowsill. Like all zubat, he didn't have any feet to speak of, so he propped himself up on his wing claws. He turned his head slowly to face the delphox and twirled his ears around to fix on him. Completely blind, he pinpointed Tracer by sound alone.

"I got some news for you," he said. "That human you asked me to follow? Well… she's up to something."

"I thought as much." Tracer let out a stream of smoke. "What is it?"

"They're building a ship," said Java. "Not just her, but the whole group she's stayin' with. Reckon Waveform's got something to do with it. I heard him buying scrap metal not too long ago, but I didn't think much of it."

"Why on earth would a human want to build a ship?" Tracer asked.

"Isn't she staying with an ex space pirate?" asked Defrag. "Maybe she's returning to the skies and taking the human with her?"

"Hey, that's not necessarily the case," said Widget. "We don't know much about humans. Maybe she's stuck and wants to get back home?"

"You're both leaping to conclusions," said Tracer. "Java, did you gather a reason as to why this human wants to build a ship?"

"Aye," said Java. "Some other 'mon she were with… Trojan I think he's called… said something about her planning a rebellion."

Tracer dropped his cigar again, but it landed on his desk this time, scattering ash all over his paperwork and fur. He beat himself down then retrieved it calmly.

"A rebellion?" Tracer frowned at his computer screen. "So Waveform is backing a rebellion now?"

"It was only a matter of time before pokemon began to rebel," said Defrag. "I mean, look at the state of these outskirts."

"Nevertheless, we can't allow it." Tracer stubbed out his cigar and turned fully to Java. "Thank you, Java. I shall pay you as promised." The delphox reached into his pocket and pulled out his palm computer. "I think we agreed on four thousand credits?"

"Yeh, we did," said Java.

"Well, I'm gonna make it five thousand," said Tracer. "After that nose dive into my window, I really think you aught to put this towards getting your hearing fixed rather than funding your organized crime gang."

His voice was laced with warning, but the zubat merely shrugged it off. "Ain't nowt wrong with my hearing, fox."

Java spread his wings and launched himself off the windowsill, curving in a neat arc towards the door. He missed the mail box by a foot and smashed into the solid woodwork.

Tracer rose with a sigh and scooped up the dazed bat, then he threw the door open and tossed Java into the evening sky. He fluttered off without a word of thanks.

…

Cyan City's tactical team was huge, and not just in number. Macro couldn't even see over the shoulder of the bibarel in front of him. His paw twitched beside his empty holster. Only one of his lasers had been returned - the one Jumper had confiscated - and inside it was just one laser module. Flying. His trusty ground, grass and water modules had been taken from him, and to make matters worse, the laser the blastoise officer had taken had also not been returned. Leaving him with only one. He deeply hoped he wouldn't find himself outnumbered in battle, because as things stood he could only aim at one head.

Between the mass of bodies, he caught the glimpse of a feraligatr marching back and forth with his paws clasped behind his scaly back. A large belt hung at a lopsided angle, weighed down by a gun that made Macro's look like a hatchling's toy. His huge mouth flapped open and closed as he spoke loudly, each syllable showing two rows of sharp, white teeth.

"As you all well know," he boomed, "Out in the orchard there's an army of grass types. We don't know how far they've penetrated Cyan City. Like most grass pokemon, they look like plants. They can camouflage themselves with ease. That's how they managed to sneak into the storehouse and slaughter everyone in there with one explosion. No survivors, not even the culprit. We managed to round up two miscreants shortly after, before they invaded yet another storehouse, but before we could get them behind bars, they died. Each one had some kind of detonator hidden in their bodies that killed them at the push of a button, destroying their vital organs."

Macro's blood turned to ice. That news hadn't reached them.

"Did you know about that?" he whispered, looking up at Switch and Anchor.

The two pokemon shook their heads, keeping their eyes on the marching feraligatr.

"Obviously we've not been able to press them for information," he said. "Several caterpillar pokemon have been retrieved from the orchard, and the damage to food supplies is increasing vastly. That's why we need this problem wiping out. Don't be scared to shoot to kill, because they're most certainly not. This has gotten wildly out of paw and needs to be brought to an end now." He fixed the group with a commanding glare and pointed one claw to the ground, before returning to marching back and forth. "You'll be broken into three groups. One will take the orchard and wipe out any plant that moves. The other will patrol the lake with the same instructions. The third group will take the city, splitting up into threes to pick off those that get cocky and venture out of the grassy areas. Listen for your number, because I'm gonna split you all up in the next five minutes.

"But first thing's first. You all know there's three space pirates in this army. Governor Jumper tells me to tell you all you're to keep your paws off. If it weren't for them, we'd have found out about this a lot later, and by then it might have been too late to save the orchard and the oshawott twins. You'll co-operate with Hunter and his friends and let the Governor deal with him. You hear me?"

A few grumbles radiated through the army and one or two leers were shot Macro's way, but he did his best to ignore them. His paw found his laser and he kept both eyes on what he could see of the feraligatr as he broke them into teams.

Macro found himself stood between Anchor and an empoleon. He eyed the large penguin pokemon warily, noting the orange hue from the setting sun reflecting off his bladed flippers. This was the imposing pokemon the feraligatr had put in charge. The one Macro was meant to listen to and take orders from. He suppressed a sneer and took note of the rest of their group. There was a number of wartortle and prinplup, a pair of politoed and an alert-looking vaporeon. There was also a quagsire who he couldn't help worrying was going to go down like a sack of rocks. Why on earth would they send a quagsire to fight an army of grass pokemon?

He gave himself a mental slap. Almost every single pokemon in Cyan City was weak to grass, but the quagsire was a perfect choice to send into battle against fire types. That dual water and ground typing would go far in that scenario, yet crumple under a razor leaf from a grass type.

"Listen up!" The empoleon's voice snapped Macro from his reverie. "For those who don't know, I'm Sergent Heatsink. In less than five minutes, we'll be marching down to the orchard. Our mission is to rescue the oshawott twins. That. Is. All. Understood?"

Loud replies of 'yes sir' came from everyone except Macro and Anchor. Switch, however, had fallen into character.

The empoleon leered at Macro then turned to Anchor.

"I'm of the understanding you have a heat tracker," said Heatsink.

Anchor nodded. "That I do, yes."

"Use it," said Heatsink. "It will be a valuable tool in uncovering hidden hostages." He turned to Switch with an unimpressed scowl. "Switch, right?"

"Yes sir." Switch saluted with his wing.

"Let me make one thing clear," said Heatsink slowly. "I don't trust you. I trust you less than I trust these pirates, and I wouldn't even trust them to handle my own droppings. You're here for one reason only, talonflame. As a means of dispatching grass types who prove problematic. Now let me introduce you to Floppy."

He waved a flipper at the vaporeon. The aquatic dog stood to attention, his glassy black eyes sparkling, but his mouth was turned into a frown as he kept Switch in his sight.

"Floppy is my sniper," said Heatsink. "He's more than equipped to deal with a nuisance like you. He's never missed a hydro pump, and

he can shoot a pidgeot out of the sky with a water pulse. You understand, bird?"

Switch nodded with as much confidence as he could muster, but every feather on his body had stood on end.

Heatsink turned to the rest of the group and barked a command to move out.

Macro and Anchor marched along, trapped between the wartortle and politoed. No one paid them much attention, but Switch found himself right behind Heatsink with Floppy on his tail. Macro's heart went out to him, and he hoped deep down that Switch wouldn't find himself on the receiving end of the vaporeon's sniping attacks.

It seemed to take forever to reach the orchard. Once again it was plunged into the darkness of night. Silent, yet deadly.

Heatsink used his bladed flippers to cut the padlock off the gate. He caught it in his other flipper before it had chance to hit the sidewalk and wake the entire grass army.

Anchor frowned into the shadows, his brow creasing around his heat tracker.

"They're definitely in there," he said quietly. "But… there seems to be less of them this time."

Heatsink turned his head to look at him. "You think there's less?"

Anchor shrugged. "They could be further back, or I'm misrememberin'. Last time I didn't have this, you see. But we passed loads of grass types. I'm warning you now, though, the berry trees and bushes are swarmin' with bugs."

Heatsink grunted his acknowledgment and pushed the gate open. "Well, let's hope this is an easier job than I'm fearing. Once we're in,

we stick together. Don't you pirates go marching off on your own, or I won't hesitate to shoot you. Understood?"

"Understood." Macro saluted then let out a snicker.

Heatsink narrowed his eyes at him, more than enough of a warning to nuke the mawile's rebellious spirit, and went on ahead into the orchard.

Just like the last time, it was difficult to tell the plants from the pokemon, but Macro kept an eye on Anchor. Heatsink kept pace beside them, watching the granbull more than his surroundings. He had the same idea as Macro. With his heat tracker, Anchor could easily tell the plants from the pokemon.

Macro let his eyes wander over the dark orchard. Anchor was right. It did look like there were much less grass pokemon than there were previously. He froze at the spot he'd seen the tropius. Not there. Of course, it could be sleeping elsewhere. But nevertheless, the lack of grass pokemon left him feeling anxious. Where were they? Somewhere else in Cyan City? Or had a majority of them gone back home to Luma City?

"There's one." Anchor's whisper seemed oddly loud.

Macro and Heatsink followed his claw to a large bush.

"It's inside there," he said. "From the shape of it, I'd say it were a snivy or servine."

Heatsink waved a flipper and a wartortle joined his side. At the Sergent's command, the wartortle drew their gun and fired at the bush. Macro didn't see what it was, but he was certain it was no laser. A soft yelp came from the bush and after a moment's pause, the wartortle ran forward. They fussed around the bush then staggered back, dragging a long, reptilian form after them.

A servine.

The empoleon stared down at it then grunted. "Well done, pirate. You were right."

Anchor grinned and tapped a claw against his heat tracker. "Nice to know it works, eh?"

"Apprehend this grass type," Heatsink told the wartortle. "We're gonna want him for questioning."

The wartortle stooped and fastened shackles over the servine's short limbs. Heatsink turned away from them and cast his eyes over the orchard.

"Any more?" he asked Anchor.

The granbull shrugged. "It's hard to pick them out from all the bugs, Sergent, but like I said. There seems to be less."

"Alright, then let's keep moving. We need to find these twins."

Heatsink marched on ahead and Macro hesitated for a second before following him. Something seemed wrong. Why were there less grass types than before? Red flashed beside him and he looked up at Switch, his beak twisted in a frown. The servine had been placed across his shoulders yet the talonflame didn't buckle under his weight. The wartortle that had shot it walked beside him, his gun still held in his paws.

Fear tactics.

Placing the grass type on Switch would serve nothing more than to terrify the servine. One overheat and he'd be well and truly toasted. Macro's lip curled up into a sneer. He couldn't help thinking that in this pointless war all three factions were the same.

"Hang on." Anchor's large paw swooped down to block the empoleon. "There's a tangrowth that way."

"Tangrowth, eh?" Heatsink scratched his head. "That's gonna take at least two sedatives. Hit it with three to be safe."

He turned and left the wartortle to fire at the sleeping pokemon. Three shots in quick succession. Macro heard each one go off and the soft thud as the first hit home.

A rustle of vines drew their attention back to the bushy pokemon. It rose, stretching out its vine-like arms as the second one hit it. Its arm struck the ground, paralysed and the tangrowth crumpled to its knees. A loud cry came from its hidden mouth, slightly muffled by all the vines covering its body. But it was as clear as day.

"Help!"

Then it hit the ground, just before the third shot struck it in the back.

Silence, save for Macro and his allies' panicked breathing.

Floppy appeared beside Switch, searching the darkness with his glassy black eyes. His breath came out cold, misting in the air and peppering Switch's wings with frost that melted no sooner than it appeared.

Yet nothing came.

Heatsink shook his head and turned away, waving a flipper at the fallen tangrowth. The wartortle took the message and rushed to shackle him with two of the prinplup and the quagsire. The latter was more to help lift the huge tangly beast than anything else.

Macro followed after Heatsink and Anchor, keeping a tight grip on his laser. He couldn't remember drawing it, but there was no way he was putting it back in its holster now. Every single rustle of leaves or grass set his fur on end. His heart had gone into overdrive, trying to hammer its way out of his rib cage. All he wanted to do was bolt from the orchard and never come back.

Something long and green fell down beside his head and he let out a shrill squeak. He leapt back and aimed his laser at it, but before he could fire, a quick stream of water struck it like a bullet. The green pokemon swung back and forth before his eyes like a pendulum.

A caterpie.

That's all it was. A caterpie, suspended on a strong, sticky thread.

Macro silently berated himself and lowered his gun. But there was something different about the caterpie. It hung there, silently, its body changing colour and consistency.

It was evolving.

Genetically modified, and it had no everstone.

Heatsink let out a grunt and looked up at the tree. Whatever berries it contained were now few and far between.

"Things are evolving, huh?" said Anchor. "That means this situations gonna get a lot worse real quick."

"You're telling me," said Heatsink. "I think I might borrow your talonflame friend and have him pick the lot off."

"They're living things," said Switch. "I'm not killing them."

"They're barely alive anymore, bud," said Macro. "You'd be doing them a favor."

Switch snorted and fixed Macro with a golden leer. "I'm not harming them. It goes against everything I believe in."

"Keep your voices down," Anchor hissed.

Macro and Switch looked up to meet matching glares from Anchor and Heatsink. The granbull nodded ahead of them. A large patch of

razz bushes. The look in Anchor's eye told him there was something… maybe even plural… lurking in those bushes.

Then Anchor's eyes widened so much so he almost lost his heat tracker. He nudged the empoleon and pointed, drawing his attention towards Macro. No one said a word.

The mawile gulped and looked up at the tree above him. The caterpie - now a metapod - still hung there, still swinging. The branch it was attached to dipped and two long vines reached down towards him. He brought his laser up to meet them, but it was knocked from his grasp. The vines looped down, one over his arm and the other around his neck.

"Well… what do we have here?" The voice was nightmarishly familiar. "You came back? And look, you brought me lots of watery snacks."

The carnivine's grinning face appeared upside-down before Macro's, each word breathing out a smell like rotten meat. Once again, Macro wanted to be sick, but any efforts to do so were suppressed as its vine tightened around his neck.

And no one was doing anything about it.

He strained to look behind him, but all he saw were a twitching Switch lying in a crumpled heap with Floppy the vaporeon beside him, his legs tangled in vines reminiscent of those that belonged to a tangrowth.

No…

He screwed his eyes shut and used his claws to prise himself free, to no avail.

"Just so you're aware," the carnivine breathed, "I'm not afraid of your flaming bird friend, no. Especially not now my allies have dealt with him. You should be more careful, shouldn't you? More quieter?

Especially since not all of us are diurnal." He twisted his head to aim a grin at Heatsink.

The empoleon took a step back, trying to avoid the tangrowth's vines as they reached across the grass towards his feet. His left flipper brushed against something and he leapt aside, his eyes fixing on a moving flower. Two vileplume and a gloom stepped out of the shadows, their tiny eyes reflecting the moonlight.

Anchor lifted a foot and brought it crashing down onto one of the vines as it snaked between his legs. Its owner shrieked from behind Macro and the vine retracted, but the one beneath the distracted Heatsink tripped him and brought him to the ground with an almighty crash. The flower pokemon scattered, filling the air with an awful stench that made Anchor choke. Heatsink soon found himself wrapped up in a cocoon of vines, cutting off yells of protest as they stifled his beak.

Anchor aimed his laser at the empoleon and fired. Small flames shot through the air as it ignited the offensive pollen around them. The flying energy sliced through the vines, eliciting another shriek from their owner and freeing Heatsink from its embrace. He rounded his laser on a spot behind the carnivine, but the carnivorous plant grinned, tightening his hold on Macro until he choked. It was becoming harder and harder to breathe.

The carnivine tutted and waved one of his free vines. "I'd be careful if I were you. Unless you want me to snap his neck?"

Macro's violet eyes opened impossibly wide, fixing on Anchor's.

"I might just do it anyway," said the carnivine. "I mean, you did both hit me the last time. It was embarrassing. But… I think this is more fun. Pokemon will do anything to keep their lives. I might see what I can get you all to do." A dry chuckle. "Drop your weapon, granbull."

His mocking laugh filled the air.

Tears welled up in Macro's eyes, but he had no free paw to wipe them away. He looked down at Switch, still twitching as he fought off a stun spore. Floppy lay in a tangle of vines, and not far from him were the prinplup and wartortle, all of which were trapped under vines or fighting off paralysis. He met Anchor's gaze again, sending him a silent plea for help, but Anchor only returned his look with an apologetic shake of the head. He let his laser fall to the floor and took a step back. Macro's heart sank.

It was useless.

Any minute now, he could die.

For the first time in a long time, Macro felt absolutely helpless… and it terrified him.

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 34

A/N - Thanks for all reads, reviews and follows! =D

I've had a few comments about Annie's scenes in this story. As well as a reminder to her progress, her part in the story is somewhat significant. But I can understand it might slow down the grass invasion plot a little. She's pretty fun to write, and I do enjoy her scenes. Especially later on. I hope readers find her entertaining also =)

Chapter Thirty Four

Macro flailed, raking his claws over the carnivine's strangling limbs. Bleeding welts appeared over the vines, but all the carnivine did was laugh. Each deep laugh breathed putrid breath in his face and he gagged.

"You know what?" said the carnivine. "This is fun! All I have to do is hold you here until the boss is done with his plan. I think I might take my time."

Macro opened a violet eye, fixing it on the carnivine's grinning face. Plan? What plan? A lone canine poked out of Macro's lips in a sneer.

"Is this to do with the twins?" he choked.

"Twins?" The carnivine turned to face him fully and his lips curled up, widening his grin further. "Oh, you mean those water babies? Oh no, they're but a bargaining tool." He chuckled. "Although there's no saying we'll hold up our end of the bargain. Is there?"

Macro's fur stood on end. Oh how he wanted to claw the carnivine's limbs off and put an end to that sinister grin.

"You sick freak!" The shout had come from Heatsink. He dragged himself to his feet, still choking on the pollen. "They're only children!"

"Now now." The carnivine waved a vine and tutted. "With that attitude, I might just kill your ally."

"Go ahead." Heatsink shrugged. "I couldn't care less about these space pirates. My job is to rescue those oshawott twins, not baby sit some punk teenagers."

Macro fixed the empoleon in a violet leer, but all words were choked off before he could spit them out.

The carnivine let out a thoughtful purr and turned to look down at the rest of Heatsink's army.

"You might not care about Hunter," he said slowly. "But what about the rest of your allies? I'm guessing the talonflame is pretty key to you, yes? Or is he just another space pirate?"

Heatsink said nothing, his gaze fixed on Floppy and the pile of incapacitated water soldiers. The carnivine didn't need words, however. A deep chuckle came from his throat and he lifted a vine to wave at the surrounding flower pokemon.

"Take the water types away," he said. "I'm sure Root will want to deal with them later."

The vileplume and her army closed in on the prinplup and wartortle, and all Heatsink could do was watch. If he put one claw wrong, the whole of his army, including Macro and his team, would be wiped off the face of System.

In Macro's peripheral vision, Switch moved. It wasn't a large movement, but enough to catch the mawile's attention. He remained frozen in the carnivine's grip, but he saw the talonflame lift his head weakly to look at him. His beak opened slightly and Macro groaned inwardly, half expecting him to aggravate the situation. To whine or throw some snarky comment.

A flash of flames streamed from his beak and struck the carnivine's offending limb. The carnivine howled, slackening his grip enough for Macro to duck and dive out of the way.

He spun his horn in a wide arc, striking the carnivorous plant right in the cranium. He went flying from the tree, his vines snapping the branch from its trunk. Macro snatched up his laser and aimed, firing a stream of air right at the carnivine. It struck him before he hit the ground, slicing through his limbs. The heat from the laser ignited the lingering pollen which engulfed his entire body in a quick burst of flames.

Macro turned to the rest of the grass army, clutching the laser in both paws. His lip curled up in a sneer and he narrowed his eyes, looking at each one in turn.

"Anyone else want to meet my little friend?!" he roared.

Anchor retrieved his own laser and joined Macro's side, keeping it fixed on the vileplume. The flower pokemon didn't move a muscle, frozen in place with what Macro hoped was fear. Floppy's spasming body was merely a foot from her own.

However, the vileplume vanished under a torrent of soil. It covered half of Floppy and peppered Switch's feathers with soggy, brown clumps. The talonflame let out a cry of protest and sputtered, shaking his stiff limbs to remove it. The vines entangling Floppy's legs snapped away, allowing the vaporeon to leap to his feet. He sprayed his body with water to remove the dirt then looked up with some surprise.

Macro and Anchor followed his gaze and the mawile's jaw dropped. Marching towards them, dragging a stunned tangrowth, was the quagsire.

"Torrent!" Heatsink said with some surprise. "Where did you get to? I thought you were caught with the rest of us."

"Sorry, Sergent," the quagsire replied. "I'd spotted this big old oaf a while back, recovering from the sedative. I'm not sure we hit him with enough tranquilizers, so I waited to take him out."

"And you also took out the vileplume and her gang," said Heatsink. "Well done."

Macro stared down at the pile of soggy mud. The vileplumes large petals were just visible beneath the mound. One mud shot and the quagsire had taken out a small army of grass types. A pokemon he'd previously doubted to be of any use in this battle. A pokemon he'd completely forgotten about.

He chuckled and let his laser fall to his side.

"Has something amused you, Hunter?" Heatsink asked.

Macro looked up at the quagsire's confused face and smiled. "I completely underestimated you."

Torrent blinked a few times then shrugged. "I do my best." He lifted a pair of cuffs, dragging the tangrowth up by one leg. "What shall I do with him?"

Heatsink crouched beside the mound of mud and began to dig out the vileplume.

"We'll take him back to the cells with the rest of them," said Heatsink. "We've got a lot of questions to ask. Right now, however, you can start giving cheri berries to your stunned team mates."

The quagsire didn't need telling twice. He handed the cuffs to Macro then rifled through his bag for solutions to the paralysis.

Macro stared at the cuffs then back at the quagsire. His first stop had been Switch, and the talonflame took the cheri berry gratefully. Macro's heart sank slightly as he realised Switch was the only reason he'd managed to get out of that carnivine's trap.

Before the quagsire could even draw out the first berry, an audible, nauseating pop resounded in the air. Heatsink let out a yell of surprise, then a groan.

"Not again…" He dragged the vileplume aside.

Blood trickled from her mouth, and her face was frozen in a state of terror.

"We're not gonna get a single word out of these, are we?" Heatsink muttered. "Guess we'll need to sedate them until we can remove the detonators, then make them talk. Otherwise they're all gonna off themselves." He paused and muttered under his breath, "This is just makin' me even more suspicious."

Anchor placed a paw on Macro's shoulder and nodded into the shadows.

"He's got a point. I'm gonna look for that carnivine," he said. "If he survived that attack, then I think we've got some questions to ask him. I can't say I liked what he were sayin'."

"Me neither." Macro tapped him on the arm as he passed. "Watch your back. There might be more. And make sure he's not detonated himself, either."

He turned away from the granbull back to Switch and cleared his throat. The talonflame looked up at him and lowered his berry.

"Thanks," said Macro. "You really saved my hide there."

"Well, you already saved my life." Switch shrugged and took another bite of his cheri. "I'm just returning the favor."

…

Tracer looked up at the run-down house, straining to see through its murky windows. He hadn't needed to get a location off Java. He knew where most pokemon lived in Spool City, it was part of his job.

He turned his eyes to the door, deeply regretting that he couldn't smoke a cigar around his mask. Something gnawed at him. Something that said this was going to be a rather tense confrontation. He quickly exchanged glances with Widget then raised a paw and rapped on the door three times.

Shuffling footsteps came from beyond it, then it creaked open, revealing a pale face surrounded by long black hair.

"Oh," said the human. "Good morning, Mister Fox."

Tracer's eyes widened behind his mask. He hadn't expected such pleasantries.

Her eyes went to Widget. "Who's the puppy?"

"Puppy?" Widget's fur bristled over his hackles.

Tracer raised a paw to his muzzle to stifle a laugh and cleared his throat.

"Pardon me, but I'm afraid we're not here on a visit," he said. "I've had a little information given to me and I need to investigate it."

"Oh?" The human raised an eyebrow.

A series of footsteps marched over the wooden floor, one of which sounded oddly mechanical. Two pokemon joined her, one of which was a goldeen encased in a glass bowl, held up on mechanical legs. Tracer wanted to say something, but the other pokemon's words cut him off.

"Who is it, Annie?" The familiar face of a female skuntank appeared over her shoulder.

Unlike many of her kind, she didn't always carry her tail over her back. Something that had become a bit of a trademark back in her pirate days. When she spotted Tracer, she placed a protective paw over the human's shoulder and pulled her back from the door.

Tracer frowned slightly, but it went unseen. "Sorry to intrude, Webber, but I've heard you're building a ship in your back yard. Is this correct?"

Web said nothing, but Annie's face split into a huge grin.

"That's right, it's mine," she said, with way too much pride.

"Why on earth would you want to build a ship?" Tracer asked. "You're not planning on joining the space pirates, are you?"

"Well, the truth is-" The human's words were cut off as Web placed a paw over her mouth.

Web looked up at him and her eyes turned serious. "She merely wants to go home."

Annie rolled her eyes to look at the skuntank then pushed her paw away from her face. A smile spread over her lips, then split into a broad grin.

"Oh right, yeh." She turned back to Tracer. "Yeh, I wanna go home. Ship's gonna take me back."

The goldeen chuckled, covering his mouth with his fins.

Tracer's brow furrowed and he stared at Annie for a good long minute.

"Lies," muttered Widget.

"Where?" Annie leant past the door and looked up at the brightening sky.

More footsteps came from inside the house. The stairs, if Tracer's mental map of the place was correct. He reached into his tail and fastened his claws over his trusty stick.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to take you in for questioning," he said. "All of you. Also, Socket has requested I bring the human in to her, and I can't very well leave without her."

Web's face turned pale and she locked her claws over Annie's slender arm. Annie, however, didn't look remotely phased.

"Socket's the creepy gothitelle, right?" she asked. "Nah. I have no interest going back to her."

"I'm afraid it's not your decision," said Tracer.

The door was yanked wide open and Waveform stood there, his vines pulled back into a bow string. Tracer yanked his stick from his tail, but before he could ready it, an arrow whizzed through the air and shot it from his grip. Widget let out a yelp of surprise and leapt to stand before the delphox.

Tracer's eyes locked onto the decidueye's and they both frowned.

"You're taking her nowhere." If words could poison, Waveform's certainly would have.

"Chill out, man." Annie placed a paw on Waveform's wing and looked back at Tracer. "Listen. That mayor said something about taking me to a lab. I spent years with four white walls around me. I ain't bein' locked in no lab. Capiche?"

Tracer blinked. Lab? He shook his head slowly, but Annie had interpreted it as a denial. Her eyes narrowed, sending a chill down his spine. She waved a paw at Web and the skuntank shoved the door. Just before it was flown shut, the goldeen reared up in his bowl and sprayed a torrent of water, soaking the delphox's ears.

"Meat eater!" he barked.

The door slammed with such force it shook the windows.

Tracer shook the water from his ears and muttered under his breath.

"Oh no you don't." Widget lowered his head and rammed his right fore-paw onto the ground. "We've got a job to finish."

He sprang forwards, launching himself towards the door.

"Widget."

Tracer's voice brought him to a halt and he turned back, but the weight of his body sent him rolling towards the door. His head and shoulders collided with the wood and he let out a stunned 'oomph!'

The door creaked open again and Annie stared down at him. "Yes?"

"Close the door!"

The voice was deep but the owner went unseen as the door was yanked from her grip. It slammed shut with such ferocity it almost sent Widget sprawling into the street.

"Ouch!" he whined, rubbing the back of his head with a paw. He looked back at the house and pouted. "That hurt."

Tracer retrieved his stick and placed it back into his thick tail.

"Are you all right, Widget?" he asked.

"I'm fine. Just slightly concussed is all." The eevee pulled himself to his feet and shook out his fur. "You know what? I think we should climb into their garden and check out this ship anyway."

"I was thinking the same thing." Tracer eyed the flimsy fence. "Do you think it would hold us?"

"No."

"I didn't mean at the same time."

"Neither did I."

Tracer raised a claw to his chin and stared at the fence, calculating roughly how high it was, and from the shape of the house how much space would be on the other side. Even if he couldn't get over himself, he could send Widget in to take some photos.

"Widget," he said. "I'm going to lift you over the top."

"You are not trapping me in a psychic bubble," the eevee protested.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to. I can't climb over it, and I can't lift myself. And if we try to climb it, or go through it, they'll hear us."

Widget met his eyes, silently protesting. Tracer knew if Widget had his way he'd just charge through the flimsy wood no matter how much of a racket it made. The eevee let out a sigh and shook his head.

"Fine," he said. "Just… be gentle, okay?"

"Always." Tracer retrieved his stick and with one flick engulfed Widget's small form in a large purple bubble.

Widget yelped and whined as he was lifted over the fence as slowly and carefully as Tracer could. He deposited him on the other side and released him, the bubble giving a purple flash that flowed through the cracks in the fence. Tracer peered through it, spotting Widget trembling on the other side.

"Pull yourself together," Tracer hissed. "It's just a little psychic bubble, not water."

Widget looked back at him over his shoulder. It was impossible to see through his mask, but Tracer just knew he'd stuck his tongue out at him. The eevee's fur leveled out and he skipped off towards the back yard, vanishing around the narrow corner.

Tracer's heart was in his throat as he waited, keeping an eye on both the street and the garden fence. He could hear the tell-tale click of

the camera application on Widget's computer and his small paws plodding over the concrete floor. The occasional flap of wings came from somewhere unseen, likely zubat or murkrow lurking about around the roof tops.

Then there was a shout.

Tracer span to face the fence as tiny footsteps grew louder. Heavier ones followed, and Widget's powerful body crashed through the fence, splintering the rotting wood into tiny pieces. Shards peppered Tracer's fur and he ducked to shield himself. Widget landed before him and turned to bolt down the street.

"Run!" he cried.

Tracer shot after him, but not without glancing over his shoulder. A scrafty gave chase, waving his fist. He didn't pursue them for long, though. He was more distracted by the destroyed fence.

Tracer followed Widget into an alleyway where the eevee finally came to a stop to catch his breath.

"Did you get the photos?" Tracer asked.

He stood with his back to the damp wall and looked back onto the main street. The scrafty had definitely stopped chasing them, but he didn't know if he'd pick up the chase again.

"Oh, I got them all right." Widget's eyes sparkled behind his mask. "Java was right. They're definitely building a ship."

"Hmm." Tracer rubbed his chin with a paw. "I still don't understand why a human would want to build a ship." He looked up at the sky, the sun now leaking through the smog. "It makes me wonder what city Socket found her on."

"Humans don't exist in System, Tracer," said Widget. "Besides. Didn't that human mention something about a lab?"

"She did, yes."

"Maybe she found herself in this world and Socket wants to run some tests on her. You know… like an autopsy to see what humans are like on the inside."

"Your imagination frightens me," said Tracer.

Widget chuckled and shook his head. "You can't say I'm wrong, though, can you? Why else would she want to take her to a lab? To give her a job?"

"'Dangerous and unstable'." Tracer quoted Socket's words as he scratched behind his ear. "I'm really worried your suspicions, despite how warped, might contain some element of truth." He sighed. "This makes me rather apprehensive to hand her over to the mayor without knowing any more details."

"So what are you gonna do?" Widget asked. "Question Socket about her intentions? Because if she knows you've botched up two chances to turn her in-"

"The first of which I was assaulted, don't forget that."

Widget shrugged. "Whatever. You botched up two chances."

"So did you."

"Yeh, but she already hates me." The eevee chuckled and looked up at him. "You're still in her good books. Wanna keep it that way? 'Cos I'd be wary of admitting you've messed up twice."

Tracer sighed and rubbed at his ears some more. They still felt damp. He really wanted to remove his mask and light up a cigar. Maybe it was time to head home? He glanced back down the alley then turned his back on it.

"I think I want to catch that human for myself," he said. "Then I can question her about where she came from, work out Socket's

intentions, and see what this ship is really for."

"Good plan," said Widget. "But you're gonna need a pretty big net 'cos I doubt she'd come willingly."

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 35

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Thirty Five

What was left of the grass army was now safely behind the impenetrable glass of Cyan City's prison cells. Jumper paced back and forth, examining each of them through the glass. The tangrowth still looked groggy from the sedative. It had taken a long time to wear off, and in that time the small detonator that had been placed inside him had been removed. The trigger for it was in his back tooth, and that had also been removed. Unseen to all of them, beneath his heavy coat of vines, his jaw was still swollen from the process.

The only other surviving members of the mob that had attacked them in the orchard were a pair of oddish, both of which had been knocked unconscious by rocks hidden inside Torrent's mud shot attack, and the carnivine who was recovering from severe burns. Surgery had revealed the detonator had actually malfunctioned under the heat and would either be unable to detonate, or would do so itself at some point with or without his wishes.

The servine they'd apprehended had detonated himself just like the rest of them, taking any answers he might have had with him.

Macro leant against the barrier between two cells, watching the frogadier as he plodded back and forth with his paws clasped behind his back. Anchor had gone for dinner with Switch, Heatsink, and some other members of the force, but the only appetite Macro had was for answers.

That carnivine had given him a hard time, memories of which would join his nightmares of fire for years to come. But during all that, he'd made the fatal mistake many gloating evil masterminds made. He'd spoken.

Somewhere in Cyan City was a pokemon named Root, and that Root was up to something, all while using poor Lossy's terrified children as a bargaining tool. However, despite their efforts, the carnivine was now silent. No more information. Nothing more about Root, the oshawott twins… nothing.

There was a chance the carnivine couldn't speak after his injuries, however. But he'd still been smirking. Even after he'd realised his detonator had been removed. That smirk told them one thing. He thought the grass army had won, and with the rate the information was coming at, they very likely had.

"There's one thing that concerns me, Hunter." Jumper came to a halt and turned to face him. "And that's the sheer number of grass types you said was allegedly hiding in that orchard. It vastly outweighs those we've managed to find - living or dead."

Macro shrugged. "I remember a tropius, ivysaur… there's every chance my mind were playin' tricks on me. I don't have fantastic night vision."

Jumper sighed and looked through the glass cell at a cowering oddish.

"Look," said Macro. "We might not know how many are in this city, but there are some things we do know." He counted them off on his claws. "Giga and Gigi are missing, and their lives are likely at risk. Your orchard is full of bugs munching away your food source. Your store houses are under threat since you've already been struck by suicide bombing grass types. And there's some pokemon called Root who's got a master plan behind all of this. So whether or not the orchard is or was teaming with grass types, your city is still in pretty bad shape right now."

Jumper leant against the glass and sighed, rubbing his face with a paw. "You're right. The numbers don't matter, it's the effects. Two tiny lives are at stake… in fact, the entire of Cyan City might be at stake, but that doesn't matter right now. We can always grow more fruit, but

we can't just bring those little twins back if anything happens to them."

Macro shook his head. "Nope. That you can not."

The frogadier rubbed his chin and stared at the floor. "We need to find out who this Root is and what he's doing. But we don't even know what species of pokemon he is."

"He's an ivysaur."

The tiny voice almost sent Jumper flying into the opposite cell. Both Jumper and Macro snapped to look at the trembling oddish huddled into the furthest corner he could fit into.

"So you can speak?" Jumper gathered himself together and folded his arms. "You were less than willing to earlier."

"You mentioned those twins," said the oddish. "I didn't want anything to do with that. I've got kids of my own! It was all Spider's idea. He twisted Root's leg and the pair of them decided to…" He trailed off and looked back at the floor. "That's all I'm sayin'. They'll kill me if I say anything else."

"Who's Spider?" Jumper demanded.

The oddish said nothing, keeping both of his tiny eyes fixed on his equally tiny feet.

"I'm gonna guess it's the carnivine," said Macro. "He didn't seem to have any concerns about their wellbeing."

Jumper made a thoughtful noise and turned back to the oddish. "Is he right?"

The oddish trembled and diverted his gaze to the wall beside him.

Jumper tutted and took a step back. "I'm going to take that as a yes. Hunter?"

The governor turned to face Macro and the serious look in his eyes made the space pirate's jaw drop slightly.

"I have a proposition for you," said Jumper. "As you're aware, my army is at a disadvantage. That became apparent in the orchard. Fortunately, Torrent is a quick thinker, but he only managed to wipe out a small number of the oddish line. If your initial suspicions are correct, there may very well be a lot more grass types in this city than it currently appears. Yes, we have weapons that can deal with it, but I do think we need more help than I initially realised."

"So you want more of my help?" Macro inwardly frowned at the thought.

"Yes," said Jumper. "You, Anchor, and your talonflame friend. You could all be of valuable use to me in this regard, and I will reward you for your help."

"You'll give me that disk?"

Jumper shook his head slowly. "That is not mine to give. But believe me, the reward will be heavily in your favor."

"Gotta say, Gov," said Macro slowly. "That disk is more valuable to me than anything else you can offer."

"Why do you want it so badly? What pleasure can it possibly give you?"

"Well, other than cheezing off Socket, not much." Macro paused as he mulled over whether it was actually time to tell Jumper the truth. "Remember that caterpie I brought to you?"

"Yes, vividly."

"Well." Macro shrugged and met the frogadier's eyes. "I got someone like that on my ship."

"And you think a disk containing government data can help her?" Jumper tutted. "Seems a little far-fetched."

"It doesn't contain government data," said Macro. "It contains her memories, and I'm trying to get them back."

Jumper's spine stiffened and his eyes widened slightly, but it was soon replaced by a frown.

"Don't be ridiculous, Hunter," he snorted. "Why on earth would Socket have her memories stored on a disk?"

"I'll let you think about that for a while."

Macro waved his paw and turned to the double doors, but any hope of a dramatic exit was destroyed as the ground surged and threw him off his feet. A deep rumble cut through the air, followed by sirens and a whole lot of shouting.

Jumper stooped beside him, offering a paw to help the groaning space pirate back to his feet.

"What on earth was that?" Macro mumbled. "Another attack?"

"Sounds like it." Jumper rose to his feet and leapt through the doors.

Macro followed close behind him, quickly checking his laser was still in place at his right side. The lack of his second weapon still left him feeling rather defenseless, and his heart pounded as he followed the governor through the police station's well-lit corridors.

The nightmarish smell of burning met his nostrils and he snorted to try and remove it. Something somewhere was on fire, and the image that filled his mind made his stomach lurch.

As they exited onto the streets, the smell grew stronger. Water pokemon gathered in the square, their voices a crescendo over the panic as a group of larger pokemon raced onto the scene. Small, green forms scattered across the square, causing yelps and

screams from the onlookers as they rushed for safety. A gap in the crowd revealed a pair of turtwig, a grotle and several bulbasaur.

Jets of water and shimmering ice erupted over the square, scattering the grass types and causing the onlookers to dive back indoors where they could view the chaos from the safety of a window.

Jumper stood with his arm before Macro, holding him back as he surveyed the situation. The small grass types dodged and dived to avoid the water and ice attacks thrown at them from Cyan City's police force. Wartortle retreated into their shells as they launched themselves into spinning attacks, bouncing off their targets and knocking them sideways. Ice engulfed two of the bulbasaur, sending them crumpling to the ground. A neatly fired water pulse knocked a servine off his feet, his long body acting as a trip wire to one of the grotle.

The prinplup that had struck him wore a smug smile, but it was wiped off his face as a large, green pokemon struck him in the back of the head, using him as a launch pad as he went soaring over his own army. The ivysaur landed on all fours at the head of his group, laughing triumphantly as he rocketed towards the end of the square.

Macro's muzzle creased and he sneered. Root. He reached for his laser and pushed Jumper's arm aside.

"After him!" Heatsink entered the scene and pointed with his large flipper. "Don't let him get away!"

The ivysaur glanced back at the army then threw his head back. "Spider!"

Air whipped up around the square as the sound of heavy, flapping wings came over the roofs of the buildings. A tropius dropped down before Heatsink and his comrades and fixed the group with a devious smile. The air was filled with a sweet smell, overpowering the water type pokemon.

Macro clasped his paw over his muzzle and dragged Jumper back into the police station, slamming the door behind him. He fired a leer out of the tiny window then turned back to the governor.

"You all right?" he asked.

Jumper nodded and rubbed his head. Good. At least he was still in control of his faculties. Macro looked back out of the window. He couldn't see much, but he could hear the crescendo of voices dying out as the pokemon retreated back into the city. All under control of that tropius's sweet scent. The very same smell that had lured Giga and Gigi away. The same smell that had almost fooled Macro.

"He's getting away," Jumper muttered.

"No he ain't." Macro reached for his laser and strained to see more of the square from the tiny window. "You got another exit to this place? 'Cos I wanna sneak up on that ivysaur."

Jumper nodded and placed a paw on Macro's shoulder.

"Come with me. You can use the fire exit."

Macro shot one last leer at the door and turned to follow Jumper through the police station's network of corridors.

"Any idea where he might be going?" Macro asked. "Got any food stores that way? Any places he might target?"

"There is one food store," Jumper explained. "But that way is mostly residential housing."

Macro snorted. "I might need a map."

"I'll be your map," said Jumper.

Macro snapped his head around and fixed him with wide, violet eyes. "You'll what?"

"You really think I'm letting you go alone?" Jumper laughed. "Don't be ridiculous."

"So you don't trust me?" Macro crossed his arms and tutted.

"Far from it." A small smile spread across Jumper's lips. "I wouldn't trust even one of my own 'mon to walk into a battle on their own. Everyone needs a little back up, Hunter."

…

Switch swerved out of the way as a hydro pump narrowly missed him. The square had erupted into chaos, filled with disoriented water types scrambling to dodge the tropius and his allies while also squabbling amongst themselves. The sickly smell permeated the air, and he threw more embers into the fray to burn the aromatic spores before they reached him.

To make matters worse, he'd long since lost sight of Anchor. That left him a lone fire type amongst a rabble of confused and angry water types.

Another stream of water shot towards him and he barrel rolled through the air, giving it a wide berth. He miscalculated how far he was from the nearby tower block and his right wing bashed the window, shattering the glass. He rolled through it into a neat room, the shards slicing at his feathers and digging into his flesh. His face twisted in a grimace, and let himself fall onto the carpeted floor.

A shriek came from behind him and he turned his head to spot a cowering buizel beside a book case. Her entire body trembled and she didn't take her wide, petrified eyes off him.

"Apologies, ma'am," he said, giving her a wink.

But it only served to make matters worse as she opened her mouth wide, letting out a shrill scream. A torrent of water flew at him and he ducked. The stream flew straight through the window, dislodging

bloodied shards of glass and sending them raining down onto the mob below.

Switch knew when he wasn't wanted. He hopped onto the window ledge and launched himself into the sky. His left wing complained, but he tuned it out, desperate to find Anchor or Heatsink in the rabble.

The tropius was unmistakable, towering over many of the water types. What had the ivysaur called him? Spider? Something metal covered his right eye, with an antennae-like protrusion sticking out like the nozzle of a sniper rifle. Occasionally it would light up, reminding Switch of the antennae behind DL's ear. Was he being controlled in some way?

Spider's palm leaf wings fluttered, whipping up those sickly spores to further disorient Heatsink's army and the lingering residents. The more disoriented they were, the easier they were to attack, and many of them found themselves trampled beneath the tropius's feet or struck with a blade of air from his long, powerful wings.

Switch didn't know much about tropius, but he knew enough about plants to know the wings weren't the source of the sweet scent attack. Plain leaves didn't smell sweet.

"Think, Switch," he said. "What do you know about tropius?"

He wracked his brain, thinking back through his history in System. No… he was fairly certain he'd not met any tropius. Not even when he explored the exotic Analogue Islands. They were filled with exeggutor, oricorio in their various forms, kecleon, toucannon, and ice type vulpix. If tropius lived there, he'd not encountered any.

Maybe back in his time in the human world…

He swerved to dodge another water attack sent his way, only to move right in front of Spider's air slash. It struck him square in the chest and he was sent barreling down into an open dumpster. He

spat fruit peels onto the floor and wiped a feather across his beak. The sweet taste of overripe berries still coated his tongue, but knowing where they'd come from made him want to vomit.

Wait… fruit…

His eyes flew to what he could see of the tall grass type. His graceful neck rose above the heads of the water types and he raised his huge feet to bring them crashing down onto those smaller than him. But what stood out to Switch were the banana-like fruit hanging just below his jaw.

A grin split the talonflame's beak and he fluttered out of the garbage to the ground. That was it. Many, many years ago he'd tried that fruit, and the one thing he remembered about it was its sweetness. He'd actually not liked it, much preferring nanab berries.

If he were to guess, that would be the source of the tropius's sweet scent. If he could remove them, the attack would be brought to an end. He just had to get close enough to burn them away. Then he could focus on that antennae.

In two wing beats, he was back in the air. He pushed himself higher until he was above the roof tops and hovered there, searching the ground below. His keen eyesight could pick out each individual pokemon in the crowd, every single movement they made. Water types mixed with grass, but the grass types were unaffected by the sweet scent. They sent their vines and leaves whipping through the air, bringing down the defenseless water types with ease. There in the midst of the crowd he spotted a familiar face. Floppy, struggling against the attacks of his allies and the grass army. The vaporeon had seen better days, and aimed each of his ice attacks at his comrades rather than Spider or any of the other grass types. Switch could almost guarantee one hit of an ice beam would bring the giant crashing down.

A few feet away from Floppy lay Heatsink, tangled in vines and providing a trip hazard to those who were too disoriented to see the

empoleon, while also posing as a barrier to those much too small to clamber over him. Switch's heart sank. He'd really hoped Heatsink had withstood the tropius's attacks. Where was Anchor?

He turned his head left and right, searching the crowd for the granbull. A hint of pink caught his eye and he span to get a better view. Anchor stood between two prinplup, fighting off an azumarill. The two penguin pokemon weren't of much help though. One of them tugged at the granbull's mowhawk while the other was too busy attacking the wall behind them.

Switch shook his head and tucked his wings to his side, swooping like a dart towards Anchor. As he drew closer, the granbull's frantic eyes locked onto his. His long canines lit up with fire and he roared. Switch stopped short of him and beat Anchor's face with his wings. Then his body heated up with an intense fire, and radiated it over the crowd. Spores turned to cinders, raining down around the water pokemon. It only affected a small radius, however. Spider's disorienting spores would soon fill in the gap.

"Switch?" Anchor's voice came out dreary, like someone who'd been woken from a deep sleep.

The talonflame grabbed him in his talons and lifted him from the crowd, carrying him high into the sky. Anchor didn't protest, he just hung there, watching the city square shrink away beneath them.

"What happened?" he asked.

"That tropius is using sweet scent to disorient everyone," Switch explained.

"Then why weren't you affected?"

"I was for a short while but I burned them away trying to attack someone else," said Switch. "I've been watching Spider's movements since then, and I think he's being controlled by that antennae over his eye."

"Spider?" Anchor blinked and looked up at him.

Switch nodded. "I believe that's what the ivysaur called him. But that doesn't matter. He needs stopping if we're going to turn this battle around."

"And how do you suggest we do that?" Anchor's voice came out clearer now, the effects of sweet scent leaving his system. "We can't get close enough to him without-"

The strange antenna by Spider's face flashed over and over until it turned orange, holding the light steady. He opened his mouth wide and roared. The orange light flashed, expanding out over the city square. Buildings exploded and water pokemon were blown backwards, their bodies smashing into stone walls where they were crushed under the rubble.

Switch's beak fell open and he dropped towards the ground. Anchor let out a shout, bringing the talonflame back around. He steadied himself in the air, keeping his wings beating so he could hold both himself and the granbull airborne.

"Well," said Anchor. "That ain't no antenna, is it?"

Switch shook his head slowly. "What on earth is it?"

Whatever it was, it was flashing intermittently again, like a beacon in the dense dust cloud. Spider focused all his attention on flapping his wings and sending up more spores. The crowd he was fighting had significantly diminished. Many lay crushed under rocks, and the grass types now wildly outnumbered the remaining water types. Switch could no longer see Floppy or Heatsink. Dust filled the square, too thick in parts and he deeply hoped they'd survived whatever that was.

"It looked like a solar beam," he said.

Anchor nodded. "It's an amplifier."

"A what?"

"A type of weapon," Anchor explained. "They're typically used for beam attacks like hyper beam and solar beam. They absorb the energy required and build it up until it hits maximum capacity, often to two or three times the original strength of the move."

"Then what do we do?" Switch asked. "Can we defeat a pokemon like that?"

"We can try, but I recommend doing so between recharges. We can either take out the amplifier, which means his solar beams might be a lot more frequent. Or we can try to take him out. Use our fire attacks while avoiding his sweet scent. Given we'd need to get up close for that, I might not be of much use to you."

"I can keep burning the spores away?" said Switch.

"That's all well and good, but I'd quite like you to hit this Spider guy if I'm honest," said Anchor.

"All right," said Switch. "Well, here's my plan. As rushed as it is." He swerved to dodge a stray water pulse sent their way from the dust cloud below. "I drop you behind Spider, or on his back, and you aim your fire fang at his fruit. Take them out, you stop his sweet scent."

"You sure about that?" Anchor grumbled.

"No, but it's all I've got right now. I've watched him. His wings don't create the smell, he fans it out with those. So it has to be generated somewhere, and that's my best guess."

Anchor grunted and gave a curt nod.

"Well then," he said. "I can give your plan a try, but while I do that make sure you keep hitting him. Hard. Take out the amplifier if you have to, otherwise Cyan City will be reduced to rubble before night fall."

"Right. But first we need to get close enough," said Switch. "And I have a plan. You see the green leafy shields beside his eyes? They would create a blind spot. Once we're towards his rear, he won't be able to see us."

Anchor nodded. "I hadn't considered that. Good spot. But how do we get there? He sees us, we're stomped."

"If I can use the dust cloud, it will cover us. Hopefully enough that he won't see us until it's too late."

"The dust cloud?" Anchor looked up at him and grinned. "Smart. I like it. Were you a ninja once or somethin'?"

Switch chuckled and shook his head. "No, but I've been in enough battles to know how to use terrain to my advantage. Now… I hope you're ready."

"I was born ready."

Switch winked at Anchor then tucked in his wings. He swooped down, keeping them above the dust cloud. At its thickest point, he whipped the cloud up with his wings to surround them. The dust filled their nostrils and Switch fought the urge to choke. Instead, he breathed out slowly, and kept his golden eyes trained on the shadowy form of the tropius.

His long neck twisted away from them, and Switch could see the antenna-like weapon blinking yellow. Slowly. Spider raised his wings and beat them, sending the dust cloud away from him. The light blinked faster, pulsing like a heart beat.

The sun.

Switch glanced towards the sky. Overcast. Not a ray of sunshine in sight. He stifled a chuckle and followed the dust cloud to Spider's side. Just like Switch had predicted, the leaves on either side of Spider's face blocked out most of his peripheral vision.

Switch swooped up towards his back, getting Anchor as close to the tropius's neck as he dared. The pair exchanged nods, and Switch let go.

The granbull landed at the base of Spider's neck. The entire of Spider's body went rigid, his wing beats freezing in mid flap. He craned his neck around, his face twisted with rage and confusion.

"Now!" Anchor roared.

Switch watched as the granbull launched himself up the tropius's neck. Then Switch arced towards his head, flexing his talons to grab the amplifier. With two pokemon attacking him from either end, Spider didn't know where to focus his attention first. He swung his head around to dislodge Anchor while trying to catch Switch in his jaws. His large wings distorted the air, making it difficult for Switch to fly. He twisted himself in mid air, stretching out his left talons to grab the amplifier. They locked over the protrusion, but Spider snatched his head back. The nozzle slipped from his grip, unharmed, and Spider brought his head back around in a brutal swing. He struck Switch in the chest, knocking all wind out of him. He flew backwards towards Spider's rear and crashed into the ground. Pain jolted through his back and his wings lay spread-eagled at his sides.

The tropius bucked, bringing his hind feet up into the air, then crashing back down onto Switch. His eyes opened wide and a silent scream escaped his beak. He screwed his eyes shut again, bracing himself for impact. A scream split the air and a thud echoed by his right ear. He snapped his eyes back open and a sigh of relief left him. Spider's rear end was coated with ice, and he saw his head swinging on his neck as he flailed, trying to dislodge Anchor as he held onto his throat with his flaming jaws. The yellow fruit that hung from Spider's neck were ablaze, and the flames spread over the leaves on his head and ears. Terrified grass pokemon stood back from him, watching with their mouths hanging open. The braver ones sent razor leaf and vine whip attacks up at the flames to try and beat them out, even if it meant the fire spreading to their own bodies.

Switch pushed himself to his feet, wheezing heavily. A lithe form stood beside him and he looked up to see which pokemon had come to his aide. Floppy stood panting with his left fore-paw raised, his livid eyes fixed on the tropius. His blue fur was peppered with dust and blood, and deep, crimson rivets ran along his shoulders and back. Even his right ear was torn, dripping blood onto the dusty floor.

"Thank you," Switch gasped.

"Don't thank me just yet," said Floppy. "The battle isn't over."

A huge roar came from Spider and he reared back onto his hind legs. Switch realised with horror that his wing beats had cleared a gap in the dust. The amplifier lit up orange and fired another beam into Cyan City, but it arced backwards as Spider bucked, cutting through one of the sky scrapers like butter. Rubble rained down around them, and both Switch and Floppy leapt aside to avoid it. Some of the grass types were less fortunate, their wails of terror almost deafening.

Switch skidded to a halt and turned back to the chaos. The dust was thick and heavy, but he could still make out Spider, bucking and swinging as he tried to dislodge Anchor's fangs from his throat.

"We need to end this," said Floppy. "Otherwise they're going to destroy the entire city."

The vaporeon lowered his body and breathed out another ice beam. This one struck one of the frightened grotle standing back from the tropius. Ice exploded over his body, freezing his scream before it could leave his lips.

Floppy fired Switch a sideways glare. "Pull yourself together and lets turn this battle around."

Switch nodded and fluttered into the air. His body heated up as flames danced over his feathers. Drawing closer to the tropius and his allies, he kept one eye on Floppy. The lone vaporeon raced into

the thick of the grass army, throwing his ice attacks at them in quick succession. Vines struck his fragile body, sending him crumpling to the floor.

Then Switch dropped, letting the heat race from his feathers in a violent heat wave. The last thing he heard were the grass army's frantic screams, then his own as Spider's hulking, blazing carcass landed right on top of him.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 36

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Thirty Six

Macro could still hear the commotion coming from the square, and it was far behind him. Screams, crashes, explosions… He ventured a glance over his shoulder, spotting the thick dust cloud over the tops of the tower blocks. What on earth was going on back there? Were Anchor and Switch okay? He swallowed dryly and joined Jumper's side.

"I think he went in here," said the frogadier.

"You serious?" Macro scratched his nose. "It's an apartment block."

"I know," said Jumper. "That's what worries me. Why's he gone into an apartment block?"

"You sure you ain't mistaken?"

Jumper looked hesitant as he eyed the huge white building. "I don't know. But I'm sure I saw him enter through the door."

"It's card key activated, right?"

"Yes."

Macro placed a paw on his hip and stared at the card key panel. Had the ivysaur hacked it? That was always a possibility. He pulled out his pocket computer and held it up to the panel.

"What are you doing?" Jumper asked.

"There's two answers to that question," said Macro. "Firstly, I'm checking to see if there's any damage or evidence left behind from

someone busting through its coding. Secondly, I'm hackin' my way in."

"You're not just going to run in guns blazing?" Jumper snorted. "I thought that was more your style."

"As much as I get a thrill from combat, I don't quite like buildings burning down around me."

"I find that quite hard to believe, given your reputation."

"Really?" Macro fired him a sideways glare. "You ever been in a burning building?"

Jumper was silent for a moment, then he sighed. "Well, I guess I'm more equipped to putting out a fire than you are."

"Aye. Water lasers are pretty shoddy when it comes to dousing flames." Macro scrolled through the jumbled text on his computer screen. "They can make a charizard run for the hills, however. Aha!" His face lit up with a grin. "Looks like you were right, Gov. Some sneaky fool's cracked their way in, and done a bad job of it n'all. It's about as obvious as a burglar leaving a smashed window and upturned bedroom."

"Are you saying you could have done a better job?"

"Eh, I ain't no hacker. I'd have made a mess n'all." Macro paused and gave the frogadier a sly smile. "Besides, I like other pokemon to know I've visited. Means they'll know I'm on to them."

The card panel beeped and the doors rattled open along their runners.

"Wretched grass type has wrecked the doors," muttered Jumper.

"No, that was me." Macro pocketed his computer and laughed. "Told you I do a shoddy job."

"Seriously," Jumper groaned. "If you weren't offering to catch this criminal, I'd make you pay for the damage."

Macro chuckled and trotted into the building. The walls were as white inside as they were outside, and chrome hand rails ran up the sides of the stair wells. Typical of most buildings the stairs were a little too high for Macro to scramble up. He eyed them warily then turned on the spot until he found a sign for the elevator.

"No idea what floor he might have fled to?" Macro asked Jumper.

The governor scratched his head and sighed. "Not a clue. I'd take the stairs and ask for witnesses."

"I can't climb those stairs." Macro tried to hide any sign of regret. "We'll need to take the elevator."

"But he could get past us if he knew we were following him."

Macro shrugged. "If he knew we were taking the stairs he could just as easily take the elevator."

"Split up?"

Macro met the frogadier's eyes. Sincere. Did he actually trust him? The thought made Macro feel a little funny inside, and it wasn't exactly a bad kind of funny.

He cleared his throat and diverted his gaze to the stair well. "I guess I could take the elevator if you can handle the stairs. You ain't much taller than me, so…"

"I can jump. Also." Jumper reached under a panel beside the stair well and flicked a switch. The far left of each step popped open and let out a smaller step, increasing their number but making the climb much more manageable. "We don't discriminate in Cyan City."

Macro's face split into a smile and he folded his arms, fixing the frogadier with one eye. "System Ground could learn a thing or two

from you."

"So." Jumper inclined his head on one side, but he met Macro's smile with one of his own. "Which are you taking? Stairs or elevator?"

"Hmm. The elevator does bring its own element of surprise," said Macro. "And I gotta say, I don't think witnesses are gonna be all that willing to talk to me, and I'm not too happy talkin' to them either. Price on my head and all that jazz."

"So I'll take the stairs then?" Jumper nodded. "In that case, take care, Hunter."

"You too, Gov." Macro pulled his laser from its holster and flicked it around in his claws. He turned his head towards the elevator and nodded. "I'm gonna go straight to the top and work my way down. My guess is he might be waitin' for a ship."

"Well, if you chase him down we can corner him. Here." Jumper reached into his belt pocket and whipped out a card. "This is my contact information. You spot him, you call me."

Macro frowned slightly then reached into his own pouch. He tugged out a small notepad and pen, then scrawled out his own number before exchanging it with Jumper's.

"Likewise," he said. "See ya in the melee, Gov."

The mawile turned and sprinted to the elevator, that funny feeling still heavy in his gut. As much as it made him feel warm inside, part of him wanted to get rid of it. In his line of work, trust often led to pain.

The elevator doors slid open silently and he slipped inside. As he watched them close after him, he caught Jumper's lithe blue form bounding up the stairs two at a time. He silently wished him luck and braced himself for the inevitable battle, watching each number light up as the elevator carried him towards the roof top.

Ten, eleven, twelve…

The chime as it reached his destination made him jump out of his skin. He berated himself for being a nervous wreck and held his gun to his chest as the doors opened. Cold air beat his face, carried down the drafty corridor. A set of grey stairs ran up towards a door that betrayed the modern look of the apartment block. The alarm bar across it was locked in place, keeping the door firmly shut despite the breeze.

Macro's first thought was to seek out the panel that would adjust the stairs, but the small flight was already equipped for smaller pokemon. An emergency feature to save time should the building need to be evacuated. He hopped up them and paused at the door, listening for any sign of life. With one kick, it flew open, an the alarm resounded throughout the entire apartment. He cursed under his breath and turned away from the roof top. No one had been through that door. If they had, the entire building would be in an uproar.

Unless…

He peered out onto the roof. Empty. Carefully he closed the door and let the alarm bar fall back into place, but the siren kept on blaring out regardless. If Root had no idea he was being hunted, he did now.

Grumbling under his breath, Macro bounded back down the stairs and made for the stairwell beside the elevator. This time there was a panel, and he pushed the lever to adjust the stairs to his liking. As convenient as it was, it wasn't exactly a time saving method, nor a silent one. Maybe for the next flight he'd slide down the hand rail.

Before he reached the next level, voices reached his ears. He paused and peered through the railings, watching a sea of colourful bodies flooding down the stairs. The entire building's water pokemon population were fleeing for their lives, but one voice rang out clearer than the others.

'… orderly fashion. I repeat, make your way to the ground floor exit in an orderly fashion.'

Macro smirked and looked up at the speaker poking out of the corner of the ceiling. Jumper was a quick thinker to use Macro's blunder with the alarm to his advantage. There was also no way Root would risk trying to blend in with the water types. That ivysaur would be lurking somewhere, most likely taking advantage of the evacuated rooms.

Macro waited for the final stragglers to leave the floor then hopped over the last few steps. His heart sank as he looked down the corridor at the row of apartments, noting the neat bends as the corridor forked off to the left and right.

Huge.

Where did he even begin?

He considered bringing up a map of the apartment block for easier navigation, but doing so would cost valuable time. Instead, he raced down the corridor, pausing to check each room. As he reached the third one, he wished desperately he had a heat tracker. It would make searching for a hidden pokemon a lot easier.

He faltered at the end of the corridor, turning his head left and right. Both corridors looked identical, save for a wreath of artificial berries nailed to one of the doors. Both ended at a dead end, complete with a large window looking out over the rooftops of Cyan City. Keeping his ears pricked, he checked the rooms on the left, then the right. Nothing in any of them.

As he retraced his footsteps, he muttered to himself, feeling his heart sink further and further. Somehow, the whole thing felt like a wild zangoose chase.

The double doors swung wildly as he raced through them. He grabbed onto the hand rail and spun himself down the stairs. Each

flight had been adjusted after the evacuation, making things a lot easier. He leapt over the last few steps onto the eleventh floor, then the building shook. He lost his footing and landed in a sprawl, his snout smooshing onto the tiled floor. The tremor subsided as suddenly as it had happened, and Macro lifted his head, rubbing his snore nose with a paw. His gun had skittered towards the wall and he scrambled to retrieve then climbed to his feet.

"What on earth was that?" he asked as he looked around.

Light flickered up the stairs and he leant through the railings to look at the corridor below. One of the lights was blinking on and off erratically, damaged by the sudden shock. His mind leapt to explosion. Two of the storehouses had already been attacked. But why an apartment block? Was there a storehouse nearby, and the towering building had been caught in the aftermath?

He turned away from the stairs to search the rooms, but as he reached the double doors his nose twitched. The faintest smell of smoke…

He looked back at the stairwell. That flickering light seemed even more sinister now. If he could smell smoke, the building might be on fire. Had the explosion come from the apartment block? Had it even been a bomb, or a weapon's misfire?

He clutched his laser tightly and gave one last glance down the corridor. If the building was on fire, he couldn't exactly stay inside it. He tutted loudly and spun towards the stairs, taking two at a time. The smell of smoke grew heavier, confirming his suspicions that it wasn't coming from outside. Each corridor he passed seemed to beckon, mocking him for not seeing his job through to the end. They could mock him all they wanted. He wasn't going to stay in a burning building, and neither was that ivysaur. It would be suicide for the both of them.

His feet skidded over the tiles of the fifth floor and his eyes widened with fear. Heavy smoke billowed up from the fourth, curling up

towards the floor above him. How had he not noticed that? His heart hammered in his throat and he glanced down the corridor. Dead ends at either end. One flight of stairs for the entire apartment block. How was that even possible?

Of course… water types. They could fight fires as they escaped. But if one end collapsed…?

He shook his head and threw himself into the smoke. Something crashed into him, sending him sprawling onto his back. The jagged edge of a step struck him in the back of the head and he yelped, almost dropping his gun. A gasp came from above him, and a heavy paw pressed into his chest. Macro blinked his eyes, bringing them back into focus. The grinning face of an ivysaur stared down at him and a dry chuckle came from his throat.

"Boy oh boy!" the ivysaur laughed. "This is my lucky day!"

Macro snorted and tried to push the reptile's huge foot away. "I'd hardly call being stuck in a burning building your 'lucky day'."

"Oh, I do. Because everything is going according to plan. Create a distraction, and flee to the roof top where Spider will come and get me. But look at this! I run into forty thousand credits on the way!"

The ivysaur roared with laughter, his peppery breath spraying Macro in the face. Spider. That was the tropius the ivysaur had called on for back up. Not the carnivine as Macro had first thought.

"Let me guess," said Macro. "Root, right?" He chuckled and lifted his paw to aim the laser at the ivysaur's ribs. "Today ain't as lucky as you thought it might be. Not for you, anyway."

Root's eyes flashed towards Macro's laser. The ivysaur's left paw smacked Macro's arm aside and pinned it, sending his laser tumbling down the stairs. Root's leering face locked back onto Macro's and split into a smirk.

"I don't think so, little mawile," he said.

The building shook, sending the ivysaur sprawling on top of Macro. Pain radiated through his ribs and his head smashed into the step yet again. He groaned and shoved Root up off him, but his heavy paw didn't leave his chest.

"Look," Macro groaned. "This whole building is gonna go up in flames, and if it does neither of us are gonna get paid."

"Paid?" Root laughed. "So Cyan City got so desperate they hired a space pirate? Such filth…"

"Filth?" Macro's muzzle creased and he fixed his dazed eyes on Root in what he hoped was an intimidating glare. "You turn innocent bug pokemon into mindless eating machines and you think you have the right to call the pokemon in this city 'filth'?!"

Root laughed and shook his head. "Anyone who hires someone like you to do their dirty work is filth. Turning some wretched bugs into tools is nothing compared to what you do, shrimp."

Tools? Macro grit his teeth together so tight it hurt. That was it. That ivysaur had drawn his last straw. Macro braced himself, pulling his feet up to his chest. Every step beneath him jabbed his spine, but he screwed his eyes shut trying to ignore the pain. Then he brought his feet into Root's gut.

The ivysaur grunted and staggered back. Then his mouth formed a neat 'o' as he fell backwards away from Macro. Root hit each step with a grunt, and Macro pushed himself up, rubbing the back of his head as he watched the ivysaur land in a sprawl on the floor beneath him. Macro's laser lay only three steps away. He snatched it up, wincing as a searing pain stabbed through his back. He made a mental note not to lie on stairs ever again.

Root staggered to his feet and fixed Macro with a glare. But the glare melted away into a snicker and the grass pokemon bolted away from

him towards the floor below.

Macro stuttered, teetering on the steps as he watched the ivysaur vanish into the black smoke.

"Wait!" he roared. "What are you doing, you moron?!"

Smoke filled his mouth and nose and he choked, beating it away from his face with a paw. The urge to give chase and the desire to race to the roof and wait for Wildcard Gamma to pick him up warred inside him. He was meant to stop Root, and leaving him would mean he'd left a job unfinished. Surely the ivysaur wouldn't race blindly into flames? He must have another plan. Maybe he was trying to lure Macro into the flames to weaken him, but in doing so that would only weaken himself. Right?

Macro tutted and backed away as smoke billowed up towards him, smoky tendrils reaching out like deadly claws desperate to grab his throat. Orange flames licked at the walls, creeping their way up towards the fifth floor. Shadows danced and strobed over the white walls. He could feel the heat licking at him, warming through his thick coat and causing his paws to break into an uncomfortable sweat.

He became very aware of his breathing. Quick and frantic. He took a step back, not taking his eyes off those flames. Deep in his mind he could hear the cries of a frightened child. His whole mouth turned dry and he took another step back, bracing himself to run.

Then he heard Root laugh. Faint. Swallowed up under the roar of flames.

Macro shook his head violently, shaking himself back to reality.

No.

No, he had a job to do. He couldn't just let Root get away. Besides, Jumper wanted him alive. Root was taking a huge risk and there was no way Macro was going to throw his job, to cause Cyan City to lose

out on getting answers to this attack and putting an end to this ridiculous type war.

He clutched his laser tight in his damp paw and carefully descended the stairs. The tiles were hot on his feet, he couldn't stand on them for long. He kept close to the rail to avoid the crawling flames, raising a paw to shield his face. A groan escaped his lips as his horn began to heat up and he warred with the urge to run back up the stairs and make a beeline for the roof top.

He reached the double doors and his paw faltered at the handle. Fire doors. He could see the blaze beyond them, burning like an inferno. He turned his head slowly at the flames creeping up the stairwell. Fire door. Inferno.

Back draft.

His mouth curled into a smile and he chuckled.

"Well played, Root," he muttered. "But not today."

He turned away from the doors and carefully crept towards the stairs. Smoke rose up them, but less than the previous floor. So the fire had been started on the fourth floor? Then that meant, hopefully, the blaze would be less and he'd actually manage to make it out.

But of course, fire spreads.

He stopped at the doors to the third floor apartments. One of them was wide open, flames licking down from above it like living, burning stalactites.

Deadly. Dangerous.

His mind once again filled with blazing flames and sobs. He shook his head sharply and fixed his eyes on a point beyond those flames.

"Come on, Macro," he said. "You got this."

He ducked through the door, feeling the heat lick at his horn, spreading through it towards his head. He screwed his eyes shut and staggered into the corridor. Once he opened them again, he was safely on the other side.

Well, safely was stretching it a bit.

The fire behind him was spreading across the ceiling, and two of the doors behind him were already ablaze. The other rooms would very soon meet the same fate. And ahead of him, where the corridor broke off into two, was filled with black smoke.

First thing was first, he had to find the one Root was hiding in.

He crept along the corridor, laser in paw, and pushed each door open as he passed. Some of them were locked and wouldn't so much as budge. The closer he drew to the smoke, the hotter it became. He feared very soon he'd have to turn and go back. He ventured a glance over his shoulder and swallowed dryly. The flames had already claimed another door, and the fire doors had learned the meaning of irony. His only other option was to bust a door down and take a leap of faith from someone's window. He wondered if Root had already done that, leaving him to burn with the building. Then he'd come back, collect his remains and half of his bounty. It was probably a more attractive idea than putting up a struggle in a blazing building with a stubborn pirate who knew how to fight his own battles.

The next door he checked moved inward. Second from the end. The heat was intense and it was giving him a killer headache.

His violet eyes searched the room, squinting through the smoke that filled it no sooner had the door opened. By the window he could just make out the leafy back of an ivysaur.

"Found ya." Macro's voice came out as more of a groan than he'd intended, but his loaded laser made his point.

Root looked back at him, his face twisted with fear and rage. But he said nothing, just turned back to the window. Macro followed his gaze. The window overlooked the square, and the end of the square was ablaze, just like the apartment block. Water pokemon stood around it, firing their attacks to beat back the flames.

A dry chuckle escaped Macro's throat and he readied his laser at Root.

"Spider burned down with the rest of your army, huh?" he mocked. "Your plan backfired? Guess that means there's no one to come and get you."

Root rounded on him and flashed his sharp canines. "I don't need anyone to come and get me."

"No. But you and I both know if you jump from that window the only way you're leaving Cyan City is if someone scrapes up your remains and sends you back to Luma in a coffin."

Root glanced left and right, then took a step back.

"Come with me," said Macro. "I'll get us both out of here. No one has to die."

"No." Root extracted his vines from the bulb on his back. "I guess they don't."

Macro's first thought that Root might be offering to lower them both into the streets was quickly filed under 'foolish expectations'. The ivysaur reached into his belt and whipped out a tiny laser, much more advanced than the one Macro held. He aimed it at the door, firing a beam that chilled Macro's fur and peppered it with ice. It struck the door, blasting it shut and freezing the card key panel.

Macro glanced at his shoulder, the ice now melted away into tiny droplets over his fur. The card panel thawed just as quickly. Macro grit his teeth together. Such a sudden change in temperatures would

have destroyed that in an instant. They were both trapped. The only way to escape the inevitable inferno was to leap from the window.

He met Root's grinning face. The ivysaur threw his head back and laughed. Laughed so hard he had to lean against the wall to stop from falling over.

"I guess they don't," he repeated. "But we're gonna. I'm taking you with me, Hunter. If I can't have forty thousand credits, no one's gonna have it. They'll be sending us both away in urns, not coffins! That is… if they can separate us from the rubble."

More laughter. Hysterical. Mad.

Macro seethed and aimed his laser at the ivysaur. He didn't want to fire. Root was no use to them dead. But all Jumper had given him was a flying laser, and the heat of the blaze had already done enough damage to the both of them.

"Look!" Macro snapped. "If we co-operate, we can get out of here alive. Surely you don't want to die, right?"

"Oh, I was always prepared to," said Root, somewhat calmly. "Any good space pirate knows the captain always goes down with his ship, right?" His face split into a sinister grin. "It's the same principle."

"It's nonsense. There's nothing for you to die for here, is there?"

"My legacy." Root spread his arms wide. "Cyan City is gonna suffer for years! Those bugs will become cocoons. They'll breed. They'll create more mindless eating machines! If things go well, Cyan City will be no more. They'll have lost, and I'll have won. Magenta City is already dealing with their own infestation."

"Magenta?" Macro's chest lurched and he almost dropped his laser.

"Yes," Root said calmly. "I guess you could think of them as a test run."

He really was mad. This whole war between the three types was pointless.

"Why are you doing this?" Macro asked. "You're making innocent bug pokemon suffer for the sake of your own dumb war."

"Bugs are pests! They're no better than the water dwellers!" Root roared. "Besides. Do you think it's easy to watch Cyan City flourish? Watch them grow food for free, while Luma and Magenta suffer? Magenta were better off than we were, however. But grass types should be able to grow food in our own wretched city! However, it weren't easy. We had to order everything. We put our heart and soul into trying to prepare orchards, but nothing would take. Every ounce of dirt we ordered from System Ground were toxic, and Cyan City wouldn't help us out. They told us we could buy from them. They'd offer us a good price." Root spat onto the floor and it sizzled away. "You can blame them for the war."

"Who fired the first shot?"

"Huh?"

"I'll blame whoever fired the first shot," said Macro.

"You think allowing us to starve isn't firing the first shot?"

Macro shrugged. "They offered you a good price, right? Cheaper than System Ground?"

"We didn't need a price, we needed charity!"

"Charity?" Macro shook his head. "I understand charity, but can you really say you needed it? Or just wanted it?"

Root curled his lip in a sneer. "You know nothing, filth!"

Macro's paw shook, making it hard to aim his laser. He grabbed it in both paws and aimed the nozzle towards Root's head.

"So all this warranted a war?" Macro spat. "A war where others are killed, pokemon have their identities taken from them… and you kidnap two little children?!"

Root threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, the children!"

"Where are they, Root?! They didn't need to be a part of this!"

Root fixed his eyes on Macro's and the corner of his mouth tugged up into a smirk. "Dead."

Macro's paws slackened, lowering his laser so it was aiming at the ivysaur's feet, and his jaw dropped. "You killed them?"

Root shrugged. "They served their purpose. I had no more need for them."

"You killed them?! Two little kids?!" Macro regained his steady paw and aimed it back at Root's head. "I have every right mind to end your life right now."

The ivysaur smirked. "Go on. Shoot. Add to the inferno!"

"No," said Macro. "Because unlike you, I'm not a monster."

Another tremor shook the floor, less violent than the first one. Macro looked over his shoulder at the closed door, the solid wall. Embers glowed around the wooden frame, smoldering and crackling, sizzling away what was left of the moisture from the ice.

"That was the fourth floor coming down." Root's voice drew his attention, and a smirk crossed the ivysaur's face. "Won't be long now until this one follows. Or the ceiling above us rains down, trapping us. Well… trapping you. This… monster… will already be long dead."

Macro shook his head. "I'm not going to kill you, Root. We're both gonna climb out that window, and the Governor can deal with you.

And you can explain to that poor, worried mother exactly what happened to her innocent children."

"No chance. I ain't talking to no water types."

Root grinned, then there was a nauseating sound. A pop. Blood trickled from between his teeth and he crumpled to the floor. Macro watched as the ivysaur's eyes rolled back into his skull.

"Drat." Macro looked back at the door. Flames had begun to lick away the woodwork as they fought their way into the small apartment. "Drat!"

He rushed to the window and threw it open. The glass felt hot and it cracked under his paws. He leant over the ledge, trying to judge the distance to the ground below. The third floor… he wouldn't survive a drop like that. He fumbled in his pouch and pulled out his computer and Jumper's contact card. His paws were shaking so much he punched the wrong number in twice. He swore loudly and tried to focus, keeping one eye on those creeping flames. Finally, he got it right. The ringer sounded in his ear, going on for far too long for his liking.

"Hunter?" Jumper's voice sent a wave of relief through his body.

"What took you so long?" Macro shrieked. "I'm trapped on the third floor. I've got a window open but all I can see is a crowd below me. There aren't even any fire fighters."

"They're tackling the inferno on the south side of the building," said Jumper. "Which side are you on?"

"No clue." Macro looked back outside, searching the opposite building for anything that might serve as a landmark. "There's a sticker on the window opposite me for a band called Giga Impact."

"That doesn't help me, Hunter," said Jumper. "Is there a street name or anything?"

Macro tried his best not to scold the frogadier. He craned over the window ledge again and squinted into the streets. Smoke was billowing from a window below him, making it hard to see the road below.

"I can't really see it," he said. "There is a street sign. I think it says… Aqua Street."

"Aquaring Court," said Jumper. "I'll send someone around to you as fast as -"

The ceiling above Macro caved in and he let out a squeak, leaping aside and dropping his computer. Plaster and wood came raining down on him, dragging with it a small, blazing arm chair. It crashed to the floor, tearing a huge wooden beam free. It landed right across Macro's thigh, pinning him to the ground. The arm chair's leg struck his computer, crushing the screen and cutting off all contact from Jumper.

Macro stared at it, his eyes widening as he watched the chair burn. Flames spread from its peeling fabric to the wooden floor, creating a trail that cut off his only escape route. He reached forwards and tried to lever the wooden beam free, but it wouldn't budge.

He turned back to the window and shouted at the top of his lungs one word he hadn't cried in years.

"Help!"

Flames licked down from the gaping hole in the ceiling and he craned his head back to look up into it. The foot of a bed teetered right above his head. His entire throat tightened and he placed a paw to his chest. He scanned the room for something, anything, that might get the wooden beam off him. His eyes fell on his laser lying a mere arm's stretch away. He leant across for it, his claws brushing its butt and pushing it further away. With a shout, he threw himself forwards. Every muscle in his side screamed, and he clenched his jaw to stop himself from screaming with them. He grabbed the tail

end of his gun and snatched it back, aiming it at the wooden beam. One shot could either go incredibly well, or incredibly badly.

He closed his eyes and fired. The wood splintered, and sharp air tore through his flesh. He screamed and dragged himself free, throwing the splintered wood aside. He placed a paw on the wall and pushed himself to his feet, limping away from the threat of the falling bed.

Over the crackling and popping he heard a roar. Not a vocal roar, but a roar of power. His eyes flew open and his heart did a somersault. Water gushed through the window, pushing back the flames and soaking the small armchair through to its framework.

"Hunter!" The voice came from outside. "Hunter, can you hear me?!"

He staggered over to the window and looked down. Jumper stood beside the blastoise he'd previously argued with. The huge officer and a fleet of wartortle aimed their attacks at the building, concentrating on Macro's fiery prison. A smile split his face and he leant against the window frame.

"I'm afraid I'm a bit stuck, Gov!" he called down.

"Don't you worry, Hunter," said Jumper. "We're gonna get you down. Hover! Over here!"

White wings beat down from above him, wafting away the smoke. A graceful swanna swooped towards the window, but her back was already occupied by a dewott.

Lossy.

Macro felt his heart break. He couldn't even look at her. No one needed to have to tell a mother her children had been mindlessly killed.

He climbed onto the swanna's back behind her, choking as fresh air filled his lungs, and watched the ground rise up slowly below them.

"Macro?" The dewott's voice was weak, shaken. "Did you find my children?"

He couldn't answer. He bit his tongue, keeping his attention on the street below.

"Macro?"

His eyes welled up and he took in a trembling breath. With a shake of his head he said, quietly, "No. I didn't find them."

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 37

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Thirty Seven

Socket tapped her foot irritably. Yobi's look of concentration as he worked on some hidden computer on the other side of the holoscreen made her blood boil.

"Well?!" she snapped.

He jerked his head around to look at her and scratched behind his right ear. "It's gonna take a little more time, Madam Mayor."

"If we want to stop that pesky mawile from interfering," she said slowly, "then we need to shut down Download Database!"

"I know, I'm working on it!" Yobi's eyes widened at Socket's purse-lipped leer and he quickly backtracked. "I mean… these things don't happen overnight, Madam Mayor. I could work faster, but… you're making me sleep, and-"

"Are you implying this is my fault?"

"No!" He waved his paws frantically. "No, not at all. It's just… okay. I'll have it out before tomorrow morning. I'll pull one all-nighter, get this virus sent through Zero Day to Download Database and then I'll sleep until lunch. If… if that's okay with you?"

"That's perfectly fine by me provided you actually get it finished!"

The sparksurfer raichu's long ears flopped back and forth as he nodded. "I will get it finished. I promise you that."

"Good. Be sure that you do."

Socket flicked off the holoscreen before Yobi could even bid her farewell. She didn't need farewells.

"That was rather rude," said Tweak.

Socket turned her head to look at the chingling. He was bouncing and jingling around on his desk, stamping through Socket's reams of paper work. A pile she thought was much too large and overdue for an efficient assistant.

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"I said it was rather rude," said Tweak. "Didn't even say goodbye or nothin'."

"That slacker doesn't need to be shown manners." She stomped over to the window, keeping one eye on the busy chingling. "And watch your mouth, Tweak. Otherwise I'll be looking for another assistant, as well as another scientist."

Tweak dropped the stamp he was holding and looked up with a start. "You're looking to replace Yobi?"

"Not yet. But if he fails to get this virus out before lunch time tomorrow, I shall be. His experiments have let me down too much already."

"In all fairness," said Tweak as he gathered up his stamp, "part of that failure was your own fleet."

"Well, they've been decimated by that creature BackDoor dragged through, haven't they? So I have to look for new ones anyway."

"Oh yeh, what's become of that creature? Ultra beast, he called it, right?"

"Last I heard, it's now making its way towards Pulse City."

"Pretty dangerous thing since it's already destroyed Favicon City," said Tweak. "Aren't you going to stop it?"

Socket's lip curled into a half smile and she chuckled. "Why would I stop it? It's not exactly threatening one of my cities right now, is it?"

The swanna landed outside Cyan City's hospital and lowered herself to the ground to allow Macro to disembark. Jumper hopped off first and offered a paw to the mawile. Macro took it hesitantly and carefully clambered down. He winced as he landed too heavily on his wounded leg and staggered into Jumper.

"Careful." Jumper steadied him on his feet and placed an arm around his waist. He then turned to address the swanna. "Thank you, Hover."

Hover nodded and took off back into the sky with one graceful flap of her wings. Macro watched her go and let out a sigh, which only made him choke into his paw.

"Oh to be able to fly," he croaked.

"Come on." Jumper encouraged him towards the hospital doors. "Let's get that leg looked at. I'm also rather concerned you might have inhaled too much smoke."

Macro hopped along beside the frogadier. "How do I tell her, Gov?"

"Hmm?" Jumper looked at him out of the corner of his eye.

"Lossy," Macro went on. "How do you tell a mother her kids have been killed?"

"We don't know that for certain," said Jumper. "All we have is the word of a deranged criminal."

"And he ain't in any state to talk now, is he?" Macro sighed again. "What sort of nutter kills themselves when they're cornered?"

"The kind that don't want to talk." Jumper pushed the doors open and led Macro into the lobby.

He caught the eye of an azumaril behind the desk, who let out a squeak of surprise when she saw Macro.

"I need to get this 'mon emergency treatment," said Jumper. "Smoke inhalation and a possible broken leg."

"It ain't broken, I can walk on it," said Macro. "It just hurts. A lot."

"That doesn't mean it's not broken."

"No, it does not," said the azumarill. She pressed a button on her head set and spoke quickly yet clearly into it. "I need a stretcher at A&E stat. I have a pokemon with a possible broken leg."

Macro let out a long sigh followed by another irritated cough. He waved Jumper off and slumped into the nearest seat.

"Look, Gov," he groaned. "Just let me get back to my ship."

"I can't do that," said Jumper. "You've helped us out a lot, and I'm not going to send a wounded 'mon away. You can consider this part of your payment."

Macro raised an eyebrow. "Payment? You're gonna pay for all this? I do have health insurance, you know. Pirate health insurance, but it still works."

Jumper laughed and fell into the seat beside him. "Insurance or not, I'm not letting you pay a single credit. So stop complaining and let the doctors do their work."

Macro grinned and shook his head. "I can't decide if you're being overly generous or just plain foolish."

"Maybe a bit of both?" A loud ringing came from Jumper's belt and he scooped out his pocket computer. A swift push of a button

revealed a disheveled empoleon. "What is it, Sergent? You're on video phone."

"How many listeners?" HeatSink asked.

"Just myself, Hunter and the receptionist."

"All right. Well, the battle has died down in the square now, Governor," said HeatSink. "But… we've lost several lives. We're just dragging out the survivors now. Two grass types have been apprehended. A bayleaf and snivy. Both of them are unconscious, but we can't guarantee they aren't gonna blow themselves up once they come around."

"Rush them to the hospital and we'll have their explosives removed," said Jumper. "Is there anything else? You look anxious."

"Yes. There is." HeatSink scratched his head and glanced to the side. "That talonflame… I'm not sure if I want to say this out loud since anyone who overhears might get a bit of a shock."

Macro leant over Jumper's shoulder so he was in the camera. "What's happened to him? He didn't get killed, did he? And what about Anchor?"

"No, they're both fine. They're rather wounded, however," the empoleon explained. "But… how much do you know about this Switch, Hunter?"

Macro frowned. "Quite a lot. He's a client. I'm tryin' to help him out."

"So you know he's not… exactly… a talonflame?"

"What are you talking about, Sergent?" Jumper snapped. "Make your point!"

The doors into the hallway swung open and two croconaw waddled into the lobby dragging a large stretcher. The front one raised an

eyebrow when he saw Macro, then looked over at Jumper as if prompting an explanation.

"I'm sorry, Sergent," said Jumper. "I have to go. The doctors are here with a stretcher."

HeatSink let out a flustered sigh. "All right. I'll call you back."

"Give it fifteen minutes," said Jumper.

"Well, we might see you there, actually," said HeatSink. "We're bringing all casualties over. Pokemon or otherwise. Got a few soldiers here who fainted from shock."

Jumper pocketed his computer and fixed Macro with wide eyes. He shook his head slowly and sighed.

"How much have you not told me?" he asked.

Macro shrugged. "Some cases are confidential. Besides. You heard. Some soldiers 'fainted from shock'. Wanna be counted in that number, Gov?"

He pushed himself from the chair and as soon as his feet struck the floor he crumpled under his own weight. The doctors rushed to his side to lift him up before he could even blink.

Jumper followed the doctors into the corridor as they wheeled Macro away on the stretcher. The mawile peered past the croconaw's shoulder to catch the governor's attention.

"I can tell you everything if you promise me you won't faint," said Macro.

Jumper shrugged and clasped his paws behind his back. "Going off what I know so far, I can assume this friend of yours is not a pokemon. Knowing that, I'm still standing, aren't I?"

"Yeh… I'm wondering if that's really a good thing."

"Well, Hunter…"

"Macro."

Jumper raised an eyebrow and stared down at him.

"Call me Macro. Hunter's just an…" Macro waved a paw. "An alias."

"Really? Well… Macro." Jumper smiled. "If I was an easy fainter, I wouldn't exactly be cut out for this job. And given the recent events - empty bugs, sudden space pirate invasions, and a raid from a psychotic grass army - I think I'm all ready for alien creatures disguising themselves as pokemon." He pulled his computer back out of his pocket and waved it at Macro. "Given three of your crew, including yourself, are going to be held in this hospital for a little while, it makes sense to alert the rest of your crew. Don't you think?"

Macro flinched as the stretcher was thrust through another set of double doors. "I would, but I kinda lost my computer in that blaze."

"I can always contact them, or you could use my computer. It's up to you."

Macro tucked his paws behind his head and yawned, evoking another coughing fit. He wanted to wrench his scarf from around his neck and throw it.

"I'm afraid I can't help you," he said. "I don't know my ship's number. I always had it on speed dial."

"What about your crew?"

"Same again. Speed dial."

Jumper pursed his lips together and stared down at his computer. "Well, I suppose Anchor will be arriving here soon enough. Other than that, we could try to hack your ship's computer? It seems only right to let everyone know their Captain and two of their friends are safe, but stranded for a while."

Macro stared at him, then flinched again as he was thrust into a large and rather white ward.

"I suppose it might actually sway you into giving me that chip if you met DL," he said. "So go ahead. Hack away."

Jumper chuckled and tucked his phone back into his pouch. "You're rather optimistic. I'll leave you in their capable paws and be back shortly."

The croconaw doctors watched him leave then turned back to Macro.

"Broken leg, huh?" The larger one leafed through a clip board. "Shame it ain't a broken spine."

Macro's heart hit his stomach. Why he'd expected everyone to suddenly be as welcoming as Jumper was a mystery. He glanced to the door, gauging the distance and trying to work out if he could actually run for it. But before he could push himself up, the large croconaw snapped his claws.

"Grab the x-ray machine," he told his colleague. "Let's see what we're working with."

…

Annie threw the back door open and let out a loud yawn.

"Wow! Got so much done today." She flopped into a chair at the kitchen table and stared across at the glass bowl.

Zip didn't look up at her. He floated with his tongue poking between his lips, scrutinizing the contents of a sheet of lined paper.

"What have you got there, little fish?" she asked.

Zip looked up with a start then beamed. "I'm working on our rebellion action plan!"

Web waddled into the kitchen clutching a towel in her paws. "Oh, he's been working on that all afternoon! Waveform has been helping him with it."

"Huh." Annie scratched her head and looked up at the door. "Where is the big old bird?"

"Having a nap." Zip looked back down at his 'action plan'.

"Mind if I have a look at that?" Annie reached across and took the sheet. The writing it contained was completely illegible to her. "What language is this? Sanskrit?"

"It's our language, dear," said Web. "Can't you read it?"

"No. I wasn't taught… whatever this is."

"But you speak it well."

"Yeh, I really don't understand how that happened." Annie turned the page left and right. "How do I read this?"

"I can read it to you." Zip splashed in his bowl. "Put it back down, okay?"

Annie placed the sheet back onto the table.

"Wrong way." Zip laughed. "Turn it one-eighty."

She twisted it round then sat back in her seat. She waved a hand at him then steepled her fingers together, much like an executive starting a meeting.

"Right, so, the first thing is we build the ship!" Zip raised a mechanical leg to tap the paper. The motion sent him toppling backwards and he let out a surprised 'whoa!'

Web gasped and dropped her tea towel, rushing to help him. But Trojan rounded the door and caught the bowl before it could shatter

on the kitchen floor. Zip was pushed back to his mechanical feet with much grumbling from Trojan.

"Good grief, kid!" the scrafty scoffed. "Watch what you're doin' on them legs! 'Cos I ain't buildin' you another mech."

"Sorry." Zip sank in his bowl. "I'm useless, aren't I? That's why you all eat us water dwellers."

"I don't eat meat," said Annie. "I prefer my fruit and veg. Better for the bowels."

"I eat whatever I can get my paws on," said Trojan. "But I ain't gonna eat Zip. Ain't got enough meat on his bones anyway, since he hardly ever eats anything."

A small smile played at the goldeen's lips. "You're funny."

"I'm bein' serious."

"He's right, Zip," said Web. "None of us are going to eat you, and if I had it my way, none of us would ever eat meat. But beggars can't be choosers in this world, dear. Besides, you don't eat much. It worries me. If you don't eat your berries, those wounds are just going to get more and more angry."

Annie's eyes went to the stitches on Zip's side. They did look rather red. She reached over her shoulder for Web and nodded to the goldeen.

"Shall I force feed him?" she asked.

Web laughed and shook her head. "I'll liquefy them into his water if I have to."

"I'll eat!" said Zip. "But I'm just busy. This is important. So… we finish the ship. Then, once we've got it flying, the first thing we should do is get weapons. I suggest Pulse City for that, since weapons are banned everywhere else. Right?"

"Not everywhere," said Trojan. "Waveform gets his arrows from somewhere."

"He's the one who suggested Pulse City," said Zip. "Well, after that, we start recruiting more pokemon for the rebellion. Adverts, marches, city talks-"

Annie opened one eye and fixed it on him. "Recruiting?"

"Of course!" said Zip. "It only makes sense. How can you start a rebellion with such a small number?"

"The ship is small," said Annie. "Too small for more than…" She counted on her fingers.

"Five, dear," said Web. "May I chime in?"

"Of course!" said Zip with a smile.

"I think going around promoting a rebellion would be much too risky." She pointed a claw at the goldeen. "And you, sir, are not just too young for all this. But you're also wounded. You should be focusing on recovering."

"No!" Zip splashed in his bowl. "I'm helping out with this rebellion! It's important to me. If we can stop pokemon eating water dwellers-"

"I know, dear, but-"

"Let me finish!" He paused and wiped a fin over his eye. "My family were killed! I want to stop more families being torn apart like mine for the sake of meat! I'm being a part of this and you're not going to stop me!"

The kitchen fell into silence, save for the bubbles wildly flowing from Zip's gills. A smile spread across Annie's face and she pointed at the goldeen.

"This fish got fire!" she said. "I like your plan, little fish. But can I suggest a few tweaks?"

"Of course!" said Zip.

"Okay. First, you take your berries. I don't want a sick member on my team, okay?"

"Okay!"

"And you need rest. You look like you haven't slept. Even rebels need to sleep." Annie paused and scratched her head. "Also, put fund raising on there. Ship might need maintenance."

"I'd suggest odd jobs," said Trojan. "Not sure how many pokemon are gonna fund a rebellion."

"Add that too," said Annie.

Zip stared at the paper then looked up at Trojan. "Please could you write it for me?"

Trojan sighed and grabbed the pen and paper.

"Now sleep," said Annie. "Chop chop. Move them legs."

Zip chuckled and skittered from the room with a cry of, "Aye aye, Captain!"

"Well done," said Web. "I've been trying to get him to rest all day. Those wounds are starting to look pretty angry. I had to change his water earlier and it's not easy to find clean water around here."

Annie turned in her chair to address the skuntank. "Which berries are best to fight infections?"

Web scratched behind her ear and dropped her voice to a whisper. "I'm gonna be honest with you, Annie. All we've got are sitrus and none are good for infections. He needs medicine."

Annie responded with a rather dramatic whisper, "Where we gonna get that then? Doctors? Hospital?"

"We can't really afford it." Web shrugged. "All we can do is try our best and hope his body is strong enough to fight it off."

Annie grunted and grabbed the sheet from Trojan. Not that she could understand the contents.

"Well, we've got a rebellion to focus on," she said. "Hopefully the little fish will make our point. Meat is bad. The mayor is bad. The whole world is bad and needs a reboot."

…

White light blinded Macro when he opened his eyes. For a brief moment, the sun-shaped dazzle spot spread across his vision and he let out a small groan. With his right paw he rubbed at his eyes, pushing himself up with his left.

No pain.

He looked down at his injured leg, hidden beneath a bed sheet. How long had it been since the croconaw doctors had put him under? He'd remembered having to breathe in loads of oxygen to clear his lungs before they could even do it. The oxygen tank still stood next to his bed, patiently waiting for its next patient. His leg, however, no longer hurt.

"Rich city medicine, eh?" He chuckled and whipped the duvet away.

"Yeek!"

He jerked his head around and fixed wide, frantic eyes on the small shape picking herself up off his bed. DL sat up in a plastic chair and rubbed her paws over her eyes.

"What are you doing here?" he gasped.

"Sorry." She yawned and stretched languidly. "We got a call and… I'm not sure how long I've been here, they don't have clocks in this place."

"Yeh." Macro scratched his head, realising with anguish that his goggles were missing. "They mustn't want patients complaining about the time dragging."

He reached for his belt, realising that was also missing. His eyes flew around the room then landed on DL. The pachirisu held out his belt and goggles while wearing a small smile.

He took them gratefully and fastened his goggles back around his head.

"The frogadier also asked me to give you this." DL held out a pocket computer in both paws.

Macro eyed it suspiciously. It was smaller than his previous one, and looked more modern as well. Not a space pirate issue at all. He took it and turned it around in his paws.

"Is there something wrong?" DL asked.

"Just worried he might have had a tracking chip installed, is all," Macro answered.

"I can't see why he'd do that. You helped out his city." DL paused and scratched behind her ear. "Besides. Matrix already checked it over. There's nothing suspicious about it at all. It's just a new computer to replace your broken one."

"Oh. Well in that case." Macro fired it up, going straight to the settings. It connected to his visor with ease. Every ounce of information backed up onto his visor synced to the little computer. A small smile spread across his lips. "Back in action."

He brought the time up on his optical display and chuckled. It worked like a charm. It was already almost supper time. That meant he'd been out for about three hours. He tucked it into his pouch and kicked his legs over the edge of the bed.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Leaving," he said.

"You can't just leave!" she gasped. "You need to be discharged!"

He shrugged. "Don't care. I can't hang around here. I've still got to retrieve your memory disk."

"About that."

He looked up at her, but she was staring at her paws.

"I don't think I want it," she said. "I appreciate all your help, but… I really don't want to remember why I have this database in my head. If I find out I actually offered, or that I even worked for a pokemon wicked enough to even do something like this-"

"DL."

She looked up and met his gaze, momentarily freezing his breath in his throat. He looked away and coughed into his paw.

"I'm getting it back regardless," he said. "You have every right to have your memories. They're who you are. Besides, you might be an innocent victim in all this. If you are, that could cost Socket her position as Mayor! Anyone who does something like that to another pokemon against their wishes-"

"But what if she had my permission? That makes me as guilty as her!"

"Who in their right mind would offer themselves up like that? Voluntarily become some mindless computer?"

"Exactly," said DL. "Someone who was insane? A psychopath? A convict offered an alternative to death?"

Macro frowned and looked down at his paws. "You seem far too innocent for that."

"Of course I do," she said. "I only possess a sense of self and my likes and dislikes."

"You also have a personality." He kicked himself off the bed and landed on his feet, flinching as a shock of pain radiated up his left leg. "Drat. I guess rich city medicine isn't perfect, huh?"

"I told you they need to discharge you first," said DL. "You haven't had a final examination yet."

Macro waved her off and marched over to the door. He paused with one paw on the handle and looked back at her.

"Switch is still here, isn't he?" he asked.

"Yes. I visited both him and Anchor before I went to find you. They're on the same ward."

"Which one?"

"Ward Eight." She slipped from the chair and joined him at the door. "I'll lead you, but you must promise to have a final examination before you leave."

"I ain't promisin' anything." He barged through the door. "If I can get that disk easily I'm gonna do it."

"Even though I just told you I don't want you to?"

"Yes." He faced her and folded his arms, meeting her frown with his own. "Look, sweetheart. If, say, in two weeks time you decide you do want all your memories back, you're gonna regret not taking an easy opportunity like this."

She sighed and glanced away from him, raising a paw to brush at her ear. The action reminded him of Matrix and he raised an eyebrow.

"Fine," she said. "Go get the wretched disk. But I don't want it."

"That's my girl," he said with sarcasm. "Now which way do we go?"

She tapped his elbow and turned right out of his room. He followed behind her, casting his eyes over the various posters and diagrams of bone fractures and physio exercises. Before long, she'd stopped at an elevator.

"It's just up on the next floor," she explained. "I doubt Switch will be ready to leave any time soon, but Anchor might be. His wounds were less serious."

"What kind of wounds?" Macro asked.

"Third degree burns," said DL. "Both of them. Although… Switch has taken some heavy damage from his fight. He could barely speak when I saw him."

Macro's spine stiffened and he blinked a few times as he processed the first part of her sentence. He'd barely even heard the final part.

"Are you kidding me?" he gasped. "Switch is a fire type!"

"Well… yeh…" DL rubbed at her arm as she watched the numbers change above the elevator. "But his human form isn't."

Macro's jaw went slack. Of course. He hadn't considered that. What had happened in that battle exactly? Why had the foolish human decided to reveal his true form?

The elevator's oddly cheerful chime dragged him out of his thoughts and he followed DL inside the glass chamber. He found himself staring out of the window behind them at Cyan City's streets as the elevator carried them up to the next floor.

The door hissed open and DL placed a paw on his shoulder. He looked back and met her eyes, filled with concern. She said nothing as she led him out into the corridor. He was immediately assaulted by the sharp smell of disinfectant. It made his nose almost retreat into his face.

"Wow." He clasped a paw over his muzzle. "I don't think they need to worry about germs surviving in the air here, never mind the floor!"

"What you're smelling is the creams they use on the burn patients." DL pushed open the nearest door. "We're here."

Macro strolled into the room, catching Matrix's bright eyes. He waved a slender arm then returned to whatever game he was playing on his pocket computer. Macro looked over at the occupied beds. Anchor and Switch lay opposite each other, while the only other patient was a vaporeon Macro recognized as Floppy. The granbull looked up and waved, flinching slightly. A huge patch of his pink fur had been burned away to reveal angry, red flesh. The damage spread from his elbow to his collar bone.

"Good to see you standing," he said. "Jumper told us you'd broken your leg."

"It healed." Macro stopped beside Switch's bed. "What on earth happened to you?"

Switch lay in his human form under a light sheet. His skin looked dry, cracked and angry in blotchy patches and part of his floppy brown fur had been burned off the side of his head. The human was asleep, his mouth and nose covered by an oxygen mask. The canister pumped away beside him noisily.

"He won't say anything," said Matrix. "He's been out cold for hours."

"Aye, he's lucky to be alive." Anchor pushed himself up and flailed for his pillow.

DL rushed to help him, placing the fluffy pillow against the wall so the granbull could lean back against it.

"Thanks, DL." He grinned widely then turned back to Macro, his grin melting into a frown. "That Spider. He had us all under the influence of sweet scent. I tell ya now, Cap'n, it's a dangerous tool in the wrong paws. It doesn't just make targets easier to hit by luring them in. Whatever he were doin'… it were sendin' us mad, Cap'n. We were attacking each other, ourselves… I don't know if that's what it usually does or if it's been genetically enhanced. But Switch figured it out and managed to snap me out of it. But it weren't the only tool that tropius were using. He also had an amplifier for solar beam. Half the city is lyin' in ruins."

"That's an overstatement," said Matrix. "I calculate the damage to be about fifteen to twenty percent."

The other three pokemon fixed the ribombee with identical frowns. He looked up and wound his antennae around in his paw.

"What?" he asked. "It is."

Anchor sighed and turned back to Macro. "Anyway. The battle escalated into a blaze. We needed to shut down Spider's sweet scent attack at its source, so while I did that Switch tried to get rid of the rest of the army. But once Spider went down, he fell. Landed right on top of Switch and took down more buildings with his amplifier. The impact struck Switch's watch and morphed him into his human form, right before rubble bounced off his ribs. If he were still in his talonflame form, he'd be dead, Cap'n. That accidental blunder saved his life. Just cost him a few broken ribs, fractured arm and a punctured lung."

"And a few burns," added Matrix.

Macro looked back down at Switch. An innocent human, trapped in another time-line and almost died. Macro had heard of the butterfly effect. One small change to history could have a huge impact on the

present. He had no idea what would happen if Switch wasn't sent back to his own time. Would losing his life change history, and as a result alter the present? One of the biggest events in their history - one Macro had believed to be only fiction - had already been rectified before Switch came through the time pocket, and he'd played a huge part in it. Allegedly, so had Macro's ancestors. But what other events had Switch been involved in? If he really was close friends with Macro's 'great times fifty grandparents', how much of an impact would accidentally changing history have on his life? His heart lurched into his throat and he launched his gaze towards the window.

"You all right, Cap'n?"

Macro looked over at Anchor. The granbull scratched his mohawk as he cast his eyes over him curiously. Macro became aware he was breathing heavily.

"Yeh." He sat down in a chair beside Switch's bed. "Yeh, I'm fine. Just… having a little wake-up slap."

"Really?" Matrix raised an eyebrow. "What about?"

"Just… we really need to get Switch back to his own time-line," Macro explained. "Soon. With little to no margin for error."

"Is that even gonna be possible?" Anchor asked. "I mean… we don't even know how Socket is opening these gateways. Do we?"

"No. So we need to find out." Macro folded his arms and leant back in his seat. "I suggest we do some more snooping around."

"None of us know how to hack," said Anchor.

"I have the most computer skills out of all of us," said Matrix, "and even I don't know."

"And DL's access to the BackDoor project has been blocked." Macro looked over at her and sighed. "Guess we either hire a hacker or pay Socket a visit."

"I ain't 'visiting' the Mayor," said Anchor. "I'm with hiring a hacker. Who did you hire the last time?"

Macro scratched beneath his goggles and stared blankly at the wall as he weighed his options. Memories of those weird 'dates' were still fresh in his mind. Somehow he really didn't want to ask Surge to perform another hacking job…

…

I realise I made a booboo by having Jumper refer to Macro by name before finding out Hunter is an alias. I need to go back and rectify that D=

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 38

A/N - Sorry for the slightly late update! Was super busy with family stuff!

Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Thirty Eight

Socket barged through the doors to Proxy Prison, sandwiched between two pidgeot. She wrenched the filter mask from her face and stuffed it into her handbag. A small yelp of protest came from deep within it, and in one fluid motion Tweak leapt from her bag and landed with a jingle on the clean, tiled floor.

"I don't know why you insisted on coming with me," she grumbled.

He smoothed out the stringy fur atop his head and looked up at her with a beaming smile reminiscent of a creepy doll.

"I got curious," he said. "Besides, all my crime dramas got canceled."

She shook her head and followed after the leading pidgeot guard. "Flying here has put my fur on end. A shower won't be enough to get this grime off me. Nothing will be enough."

"You could shave?"

Socket resisted the urge to trample the chingling into mosaic art and instead focused on following her body guards through the winding corridors. It felt like it would never end. But at least, being a government facility, the prison had some level of cleanliness compared to the outside streets. The air was clean, the floors were mopped daily. But everything was grey.

The leading pidgeot paused beside a small, single door and stood aside for Socket.

"This is his office, ma'am," he said.

"Really?" Socket took a deep breath and rapped on the door. "He'd better make this quick."

"Come in!" The voice was irritatingly cheerful.

She shoved the door open, revealing a squat desk displaying a significant lack of organization. A stack of trays stood at one side, oddly empty save for one unopened envelope. Crumbs and sugar littered the paperwork while an empty donut container had found a second job as a pen holder (despite the plastic cup designed specifically for the job lying beneath a mound of newspapers.)

A grumpig sat with his feet on the desk, licking sugar off his paws. He looked up at her and smiled broadly. A smile intended to be warm but instead it lit a fire in her stomach that radiated out of her eyes, melting the smile back off his face.

"So sorry to drag you out here, Mayor Socket." He lifted his feet off the desk and adjusted himself in a bid to appear more professional. "But it's important you see all this first hand."

She waved a paw at his office. "I hope whatever it is can be found in your dump."

"Oh yes," he said with a nervous laugh. "Some of what I want to show you is on the computer."

"Really? And you couldn't just email it to me?"

"Well… it's kind of confidential, and given recent events…" The grumpig's eyes wandered to the pidgeot then drifted down towards Tweak.

Socket followed his gaze to the grinning chingling and tutted. "You're all excused. Allow me to talk to this officer in peace."

The pidgeot guards retreated from the room, the last one holding the door open for Tweak. However, the tiny psychic type didn't budge.

"Tweak?" Socket's voice was laced with ice.

"Nah, I wanna stay," said Tweak. "I'm taking notes."

Socket didn't even want to ask where he pulled his notebook and pen from.

She tutted and looked back up at the grumpig. "He's fine. He won't spill anything because he knows full well if he does he'll be turned into an ornamental wind chime… A silent one."

Tweak chuckled and waved his pen at her.

"You think I'm joking," she said.

"I actually don't," said Tweak. "That's why it's funny."

The grumpig shook his head and waved a paw. "If you trust him, Mayor, then I'll take your word for it."

Socket nodded to the waiting pidgeot and they let the door close silently. She turned back to the grumpig and her expression turned steely.

"So?" she asked. "What is it?"

He cleared his throat and ushered her towards his desk. When she didn't move, he turned the computer monitor towards her, knocking several documents onto the floor.

"As you can see, we've been interviewing Troll." He met her raised eyebrow and inclined his head on one side. "The croagunk? The one you had arrested for hacking?"

"I know you mean the croagunk," she said. "I'm the one who asked you to question him. Get on with it."

"Oh yes, well." He turned back to the computer and scrolled through the masses of text. "He's been pleading 'not guilty' since we got here. We've had an impromptu court case, but results have been less than reliable. So many have accused him of this crime but their reasons were… shaky at best."

"Shaky how?" she asked slowly.

The grumpig stuttered and looked between her and the computer. Tweak bounced up and down, jingling euphorically.

"Oh! I know, I know!" he said. "They're scared of you, Mayor!"

The grumpig paled and fixed one eye on the chingling. The hairs on the back of Socket's neck stood on end, but she clasped her paws before her and forced a smile which only seemed to chill the officer even more.

"Well," she said. "At least we know where their loyalties lie. Do continue."

The officer shifted in his seat and continued scrolling through the text Socket was making every effort not to read.

"Given… that… reasoning," he said, "we decided to run more thorough lie detector examinations. They met the same results as the ones given prior to the court case. Each plea he makes that he didn't hack, and that he doesn't even know how to, were shown to be true."

"So he's either a convincing liar or innocent," said Socket.

"I'd go with convincing liar," said Tweak. "We traced his number right back from the hacked systems."

"Someone could have stolen his phone," said the grumpig. "But it is very positive evidence. However, something else keeps coming up, which is partly why I've asked you to come here, Mayor."

Socket raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"He keeps mentioning a pokemon's name," he said. "Keeps saying he 'should never have trusted Surge'."

Socket's spine stiffened and she fixed the grumpig with a piercing glare. "Surge?"

"I know you've hired her," he said. "That's why I wanted to tell you. Given she's a mercenary and had been working for Tracer, word must have got back to this croagunk. I don't know what he means. Maybe he thinks she's falsely turned him in for revenge or something. I get the impression he either hired her himself, or worked for her. Or both. I dunno but gut feeling says she's got something to do with him being here."

"Have you quizzed him on this?" she asked.

"Yeh, we've tried," said the officer. "But it's hard to ask questions to such a hazy clue, Mayor. He said he's worried she traced hacking back to him. She's apparently a Jack of All Trades, but he doesn't know if she's a hacker or not. Apparently the work she did for him was… well… assassination."

"You're saying she killed someone? I've hired some murderer?"

"Well…" The grumpig reached under his desk and pulled out a fresh box of donuts. "I'm not… entirely-"

"Are you seriously going to eat those in my presence?" Socket hissed.

He froze, paw half inside the box. "I'm sorry, Mayor. When I'm stressed, I eat."

"Well wait! Now… do go on."

He gently closed the lid and sighed. "It's difficult to say, Mayor. The lie detector test for this particular interview tells us he's telling the

truth, but covering something up. He wouldn't give the name of the pokemon he had assassinated. All he would tell us was it was a pirate. So, given your current law, not exactly murder given the pirate was turned in and the price was split forty-sixty, with Troll getting the short end of the deal. Apparently he'd had a bit of a dispute with the pirate, but again wouldn't go into details. So it depends if you consider a personal dispute against a pirate murder, or a genuine turn-in of the bounty."

She pursed her lips and tapped her claws along her arm. "That is something we can use against him to get to the bottom of this then… isn't it?"

"Blackmail?" the officer asked.

Tweak looked up at her with a start, almost dropping his pen.

"How much do you trust this Surge, Mayor?" the grumpig asked.

"I trusted her when I hired her," said Socket. "Although she did seem rather on edge. I could put that down to her merely being in my presence, but events have unfolded recently that have aroused my suspicion. There's been a crisis in Binary City where a magnezone and his fleet were attacked by a heat laser, but I wasn't sure if that was Hunter having obtained one, or if it were Surge since I gifted her one for the task of rounding up Wildcard Gamma. I was willing to push it aside until further evidence was obtained, but if Surge really isn't to be trusted… if she actually did hack into government files… who was she working for then? Curiosity? Or has Hunter got her wrapped around his paw?"

"So you think it might have been her?" the grumpig asked. "She's somehow traced the hacking back to Troll to cover her tracks?"

"There's only one way to find out," said Socket. "We have to trick the information out of him if he's not willing to give every teeny tiny detail."

"He might not know the fine details," said the grumpig. "If he's been framed, he's not going to know how, or when, or why. Is he?"

"I say we find out if his plea that he can't actually hack are really true, and leave that as our evidence," said Socket. "Give him a task where the stakes are high. Something that drives the most motive to actually try to successfully hack into a government file. One that it doesn't really matter if he sees."

"Like last year's air cleanliness records?" Tweak suggested.

"Exactly," said Socket. "For Meta City."

"And how do we drive him to do it?" the officer asked. "Reward him if he actually can? A cash reward?"

"No. That's not driving enough," said Socket. "He might merely shrug it off. A criminal can get his money another way, can't he? No. I say we raise the stakes. If he can hack, he gets a reduced prison sentence. Ten years taken off, there and then. And if he fails, he dies."

The grumpig dropped his donut box onto the floor, scattering sugar and sprinkles everywhere. Socket eyed the mess with malevolence and dug her claws into the soft flesh of her arm.

"But what if he actually can't hack?" the officer gasped. "If he's telling the truth, you'll be sending an innocent pokemon to his death!"

"The stakes are a lie," she said. "They're to drive him. And I'll be the one to give him the stakes because I sincerely doubt you could do it with a straight face. He'd see right through you."

He trembled in his seat, the motion making his soft flesh jiggle. "Very well. Then… what are the real stakes?"

"If he's telling the truth, he's excused. Any motive to have that unnamed space pirate assassinated will be written off and he'll be

sent free. No ifs or buts. However, if he's lying and he truly is the hacker, he's to be put to death."

The grumpig nodded slowly. "Okay, Mayor. We can arrange this. Let's see, when can we run this test?"

He reached for his desk calendar, but Socket's voice froze him to the spot.

"Now."

"Now?" He snapped his head around to face her. "But Mayor, the room isn't even set up. The test isn't ready-"

"I said now," she said. "I'm done wasting my time here. Get Troll and bring him to the exam room. I'll have Tweak set up the files for hacking." She rounded on the chingling. "Make it difficult. I don't want any false results."

"Aye aye, Ma'am!" Tweak saluted and tossed his note book up to her.

She caught it instinctively and stared down at the illegible scrawl. With a sigh, she stuffed it into her purse and followed the officer and chingling from the room.

…

Several times Macro had almost dialed Surge. Several times he'd become too nervous and backed out. DL and Anchor sat watching in fascination while Matrix looked up from his game whenever Macro so much as twitched.

"I doubt she's going to dial you," said the ribombee. "You really need to get a wiggle on."

Macro let out a flustered sigh and stuffed his computer back into his pouch. "Forget it. I'll do it later. I'm too sore to put up with any of her tricks right now anyway."

"What tricks?" Matrix and Anchor asked in unison.

Macro waved a paw. "Nothing you need concern yourself over."

Anchor and Matrix exchanged glances.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Anchor asked.

"Maybe." Matrix looked back down at his computer. "I was picking up some vibes off her. Maybe I might be able to learn a thing or two."

"Seriously?" Anchor sat bolt upright. "Macro gets a girlfriend and you're picking up flirting vibes?"

Macro jolted in his seat and stared at the granbull slack-jawed. DL looked between each pokemon in turn.

"Oh." Matrix glanced up at Anchor. "Guess we weren't thinking the same thing. I just assumed she was a prankster and it's been a while since I last played a practical joke on one of you. I mean, you were both so easy it kinda got dull."

Macro groaned and ran a paw down his face. "She is not my girlfriend."

"Then what are you so nervous about?" Anchor asked.

"You haven't met her." Macro stood up and paced over to the door, faltered, then turned and walked back to his chair. "Man, I'm getting cabin fever being cooped up in this place. I just wanna get back to my ship."

"That might be able to be arranged." Jumper's voice froze him before he reached his seat.

They all turned to look at the door. The frogadier leant against the frame, a small smile playing at his lips.

"I was worried I'd missed you," he told Macro. "I went to your ward and when I saw you weren't there I assumed you were off somewhere trying to find that disk."

"I'm kinda planning it out," said Macro. "Just waitin' on Matrix to download me a map of every government building in this city."

"And I'm totally not doing that right now," said Matrix.

Macro fired him a glare but Jumper silenced him with a raised paw.

"You have no need for maps," said Jumper. "I actually need to talk to you. All of you. You see…" His eyes drifted to DL then went back to Macro. "I've had some of my officers round up as many bugs as they can find in the orchard. It's like watching the undead. There really is nothing left inside them, is there?"

"Nope," said Macro. "And I'm gonna hazard a guess that unlike DL their personalities aren't stored on disks somewhere."

"I'm inclined to agree with you," said Jumper. "But until we can get into Luma City and find out for certain how to rescue these poor pokemon, there's not much we can do for them. A lot of research will be put into memory removal and installation, but until then, every bug will be collected and confined in cells for the foreseeable future."

"All right, so you've got the bugs sorted. But what of the grass army and the twins?" Macro folded his arms and inclined his head on one side. "Has anyone even found their bodies? Will there be another attack? As far as I'm concerned, you've got your work cut out for you here, Gov."

"He's right." Anchor sipped at a glass of water. "That army put up a fight. If it weren't for Switch I don't think we would have won that battle."

Jumper looked over at the unconscious human and sighed. "Yes, I agree with you there too. That fight could have escalated into an

even bigger disaster. Really, Wildcard, I honestly can't thank you enough."

Macro let out a small chuckle. "So. About them maps. You said I have no need for them, so what are you gonna do? Hand them to me as a thanks and let me run riot for a while? 'Cos I'm all up for a bit of fun."

"Not quite." Jumper fixed his eyes on his. "I might have to cut your fun short, Macro."

Macro kept his eyes on the frogadier's paw as he reached into his belt pouch. Macro's first thought was that he was reaching for a gun, but instead Jumper pulled out something tiny and black and held it out in his open paw.

"I know you were all up for searching for it," said Jumper. "But my guards aren't up for playing with you right now. I might as well cut your search short."

Macro's mouth went from a neat, stunned 'o' to a huge grin. He took the tiny disk in his claws and stared at it, half believing that at any moment he was going to wake up and it would just be a dream.

"You're just giving me this?" he asked.

"Yes, but I still don't think it's thanks enough." Jumper shrugged. "It feels more like I'm just doing the right thing. Seeing all those bug pokemon, while your friend DL here is on her way to recovery… who am I to stop her from making that recovery?"

"So you believe me?" Macro looked up at him and narrowed his eyes. "For all you know, I could be filling you with lies to acquire government secrets."

"That thought did cross my mind," said Jumper. "But I've met DL. While you were out, we had a little chat. She's told me everything, and your stories match up. Well… what she can recall, anyway."

Macro smirked and placed the disk in his belt pouch. "I think you're a little gullible, Gov."

"Perhaps. That makes my next offer a rather risky one." Jumper fastened his paws behind his back. "Given all you have done for us, I want to personally offer you sanctuary in Cyan City."

Macro let out a yell and Anchor dropped his glass, spilling water all over his lap. The vaporeon in the bed next to him almost leapt out from beneath the sheets. He fixed wide eyes on the occupants of the room and flopped back down onto his pillow. Anchor folded the sodden sheet over itself in an attempt to stop water spilling onto the floor.

"You serious?" he gasped.

Macro pointed at the frogadier. "You're gonna offer us space pirates sanctuary? In a government run city?"

"I agree it's a huge risk," said Jumper. "But I'm hardly going to turn away pokemon who helped us avoid destruction, am I?"

"And what's Socket going to say?"

"Socket doesn't need to know." Jumper's expression turned steely. "Given what she's done to DL, and what you are doing to help her, who do you think the good guys are in this situation?"

"Pirates ain't good guys," said Macro.

"That's in the eye of the beholder." Jumper fixed DL with a warm smile. "I think this one would be inclined to agree with me."

"So do I." The vaporeon's voice came out weak. "No pirate would have risked being turned in just to save one city. Especially not one they'd planned to invade."

Macro eyes flicked from Floppy back to Jumper. He opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. Instead he fell back into his

seat and looked over at Switch.

Jumper smiled and shrugged. "See? I'm sure many others will agree, too. And don't worry about your friend. My offer extends to him. He can safely recover here if you need to be on your way. I'll contact you when he's ready to be collected."

Macro let out a dry laugh and shook his head. "And you seriously don't think this offer is enough of a thank you…"

"I think you're nuts," said Anchor. "In a good way."

Jumper laughed and turned towards the door. "I'll leave you be. If I don't see you before you leave, have a safe journey. I'll be in touch, and remember. Don't be a stranger."

They watched the frogadier leave the room, then DL turned to Macro, her chocolate eyes sparkling.

"Is it weird that I want to cry?" she asked.

"Yes," said Matrix.

"Ignore him." Macro hugged his arms around himself and looked at the wall. "It's not weird at all."

"I don't think you're the only one." Anchor wiped his eyes on his bed sheet then offered it to the pachirisu. "Here."

A croaking laugh came from Floppy's bed. "You pirates are as soft as butter."

Macro snorted but didn't look back at him. "Then be glad you're not a bread roll."

"Ah, don't take offense." Floppy laughed again. "It's a good thing. Believe me."

…

Annie stared up at the huge pyukumuku ship. It looked a lot bigger than its framework had made it look. It stood proud in the back garden, fully fleshed out with an impact resistant shell and sporting what Trojan had assured her was 'state of the art weaponry'. Of course, she couldn't see it. It was inside the ship, rather than marring the pyukumuku's appearance with bulky, ugly turrets.

Trojan pushed a button in the hull of the ship and an oblong door clattered open, falling towards the ground like a draw bridge. Annie's eyes lit up, and a squeal of delight came from the fish bowl beside her.

"It's so awesome!" Zip cried as he skittered over to the drawbridge. "I can't wait to see inside!"

"Oi!" Trojan called at the goldeen's tail. "Don't you go splashing water everywhere now, you 'ear me?"

"Whoa!" Zip's voice came from the shadows. "It's so cool!"

Web wiped a tea towel over her brow and turned her eyes onto Annie. "Are you seriously going to fly off in that thing?"

"Of course." Annie placed a hand on her hip and grinned. "It's the perfect ship for a rebellion."

"I don't know…" Web wound the towel in her paws. "It looks less like a ship and more like a shipwreck waiting to happen. I fear it'll come down no sooner you get it into the sky. Where's its wings?"

"Pyukumuku don't have wings," said Trojan.

Annie looked at Web and nodded towards Trojan.

"Have you even test flown it yet?" Web asked.

"Nope. That's what we're gonna do now." Trojan turned to clamber into the ship.

"Really?" Web's brow knitted into a frown. "With a child on board?"

"Hey, he climbed on first," said Trojan.

"I want him off that ship," said Web. "I need to know it can actually stay in the air longer than five minutes before I allow him, or Annie, onto that thing."

"No can do," said Trojan. "As soon as this thing is in the air, it's stayin' there. It's not gonna be the easiest thing to land without a good mile to plan, at least."

Web's jaw dropped and she looked away. "I really don't like this."

Waveform strode from the house with a sack slung over his back. He gave Web's shoulder a squeeze then strode past her towards the ship.

"You too?" Web gasped.

"Yup." The decidueye paused by the drawbridge and tossed the sack inside to be swallowed up by the shadows. "I don't plan on staying around here a day longer."

Web's eyes narrowed into slits. "Why is this so important to you?"

Waveform met her look head on and shrugged. "You come with us, you'll find out."

Trojan watched the decidueye climb on board then looked back at Web, her questioning gaze now fixed on him.

"Don't look at me, I don't know either," he said. "I'm just glad there's another sane 'mon on board."

The scrafty mounted the drawbridge and vanished inside the pyukumuku. Annie looked back at Web and smiled.

"Well, it's been lovely," she said. "But I'm gonna have to go head this rebellion now. Put the kettle on, we'll be back by tea time."

"No we won't," said Trojan. "We're headed to Pulse City. It's a three day round trip, provided this thing can actually move faster than a real pyukumuku."

"Oh." Annie scratched her chin and looked up at the night sky. "All right then. Three days. I'll be needing that coffee."

Her heavy feet clattered over the hollow iron sheet that formed the drawbridge door. When she reached the inside, she looked around at the ship and let out a long whistle. The paneled wall had been given a brisk coat of paint, but graffiti still showed through in parts. That, coupled with the low lighting, gave it a somewhat grungy feel. Her entire body tingled with excitement. She gave one last look over her shoulder at the skuntank, still standing staring up at the ship.

"You sure you don't wanna see this?" Annie asked. "Last chance before we fly."

Waveform placed a wing on her shoulder and steered her away from the door.

"Come on," he said. "Web told me she won't step paw in Pulse City. She left that side of her past behind years ago."

"But we're not space pirates," said Annie. "We're rebels."

"They may as well be the same thing," said Web. "Besides. You lot won't survive five minutes in Pulse City. Especially not you, Waveform. You're a bounty hunter, and a famous one at that! They'll have your hide and turn your feathers into ink quills!"

Waveform sighed and opened his beak to speak, but Trojan appeared beside him and pointed a claw at the skuntank.

"Look!" he said. "You gonna come aboard this ship, or just stand there shoutin' at us until we take off? 'Cos if it's the latter, you're gonna wanna take several steps back. This thing uses thrusters to get into the air and I reckon it's gonna make a jackin' mess."

Web shook her head slowly and took three steps back. Annie caught a glare off her as the drawbridge rose, then she was hidden from view as the door clattered into place.

"All righty then." Trojan fell into a leather seat and struck something on the dashboard. "Let's get this party started, shall we?"

Lights flooded the ship and Annie raised a hand to her eyes with a squeal. As she blinked the dazzle spots away, she looked around at the spacious cockpit. It was like viewing it from a new angle. A brighter, yet still grungy, angle.

"I'd find yourselves seats if I were you," said Trojan.

Annie took the one beside the scrafty. Another leather chair. The other seats were rickety. Two plastic foldaway chairs screwed to the tinny floor. Zip found his spot in a heartbeat. Little supports had been fastened to the floor and they clamped over his mechanical feet firmly.

The engine flared to life, its roar filling the small space and shaking the entire ship so much the door rattled.

"Hey!" Web's voice cried over the din. "Hey! Open up, I want in!"

Annie and Trojan exchanged looks and the human rose to her feet. The drawbridge door fell back abruptly, eliciting a squeak from the skuntank. She quickly regained her composure and fixed Annie with a glare.

"Thank you," she said, pushing past Annie. "Quick, close it up before I change my mind again."

Annie shrugged and pulled the door closed, then returned to her seat. Web took the only free chair beside Waveform.

"What made you change your mind?" Trojan asked without looking up.

"Oh, just the thought that all of you might be slaughtered in Pulse City," she said. "You need someone with experience dealing with those sort of pokemon."

"You mean Space Pirates? I've been dealin' with one of those for years."

Trojan pulled the steering stick back and the ship lurched into the air, silencing Web's retort before it could leave her mouth.

Annie was thrust back into her seat, then left it as the ship fell back down again. Her stomach shot into her throat and she let out a loud cheer and threw her arms into the air. Another thrust sent them soaring higher into the sky.

"This is awesome!" she yelled over the engine. "Viva la rebellion!"

Zip cheered as well, waving his tiny fins.

The ship fell down again several feet before the thrusters blasted them back into the sky, higher and higher as the pyukumuku was raised over the rooftops.

Annie's laughter filled the cockpit, drawing a glare from Trojan and a worried glance from Web.

"Anyway." She stopped laughing as fast as she'd started and turned to address Web. "Glad to have you with us, Number Two."

"Number Two?" Web and Trojan asked at the same time, the latter with a snort.

"Yeh," said Annie. "Web's always been my number two."

"Really?" Trojan grumbled. "I thought if Waveform were your Number One, then second in command would be me."

The ship leveled out in the air, slowly rising up towards the clouds. Heavy clouds, black against the deep blue sky.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Annie. "You're my engineering officer."

"Oh." He shrugged. "All right then."

"Then what am I?" Zip asked. "His assistant?"

"Oh no, no." Annie twisted in her seat to face him. "You, little fish, are my Assistant in Rebellioness. I'm hoping I can count on you."

Zip cheered again. "You can count on me for anything!"

Web groaned and ran a paw over her face.

Waveform looked down at her. "Having second thoughts?"

She shook her head and sighed. "No. I actually think I've done the right thing. Someone needs to keep all of you in check."

…

Macro had refused to go back to his room. Instead, he remained sat in his chair while the doctor checked him over. With a nod, the croconaw sat back and jabbed something into his computer screen that the mawile couldn't see.

"You're all clear to go," he said. "Just take it easy for a while. Don't stress your leg too much."

Macro nodded and looked up at Anchor. The granbull sat on the edge of his bed, stretching his stiff limbs. More fur had been burned away than Macro had initially noticed. Bare patches mottled Anchor's chest and right leg, but they didn't look angry.

'Rich city medicine.'

Macro looked over at Switch, still lying unconscious. Was there really nothing they could do to bring him around before he went back to his ship?

Jumper kicked back from the wall and smiled at the space pirate. "I guess if you're ready to leave, then this is goodbye?"

Macro snorted but a smile spread across his lips. "Can't wait to get rid of me, eh Gov?"

"That's not what I'm saying at all," said Jumper, meeting his smile. "I actually hope you'll come back and visit. I'd love to see how young DL is getting along with her memories."

DL smiled and raised a paw to try and cover up the blush that dusted her cheeks.

"Well, if Switch is stayin' here then it's highly likely." Macro rose to his feet, ignoring the helping paw from the croconaw. "All right, crew. Let's beat it back to Wildcard Gamma."

Anchor dropped to his feet, flinching with the impact. A look of concern crossed the doctor's face, but it melted away when Anchor trudged past him to join Macro's side.

Matrix buzzed beside the mawile's head while staring at his computer. "The ship is parked above the hospital. I can get the ladder down to the roof if you want to exit that way?"

"Why?" Jumper inclined his head on one side. "You're not escaping, you're just leaving. You can use the street. No one's going to stop you."

"This is mighty alien, Cap'n," said Anchor quietly.

"Embrace it," said Macro. "Because I highly doubt this will happen again any time soon." A light went on in his mind and he absently

pawed at the empty holster on his belt. "What about our weapons? Those things ain't cheap, yanno."

"I have that covered," said Jumper. "You can collect them at reception on your way out. They don't generally allow firearms in the wards."

Macro snorted and shrugged. "Ain't like Pulse City hospital, that's for certain."

Jumper ignored his remark and led them to the door. Macro paused beside it, his eyes drifting back to the unconscious human.

"We'll be back for you, Switch," he said. "I promise you that. We'll get you home. I never leave a job unfinished."

As the door closed, his mind drifted back to Lossy and his stomach tied itself in knots. No. He never left a job unfinished, but it wasn't often he failed at one either.

"Hey, Gov," he said. "Give Lossy our condolences won't you?"

"Of course, Macro," said Jumper.

"And if we hear anything about the twins… well, I've got your number."

Jumper chuckled. "I understand. I'll keep you updated."

A flood of relief spread through Macro's body and he kept pace beside Jumper until they reached the reception. Before Macro could remind the Governor, he retrieved a bag from beside the azumarill, almost collapsing under its weight.

"I think you'll find everything is in here." He dropped it at the space pirate's feet.

Anchor tugged it open and grinned, retrieving his gauntlets as though he'd not seen them in years. Once Macro's guns were back

in place he let out a small, satisfied sigh.

"I don't really understand you space pirates," said Jumper. "But I trust you won't say anything of us dodging a weapon ban?"

"Nope," said Macro. "Ran plenty of errands for those dodging the ban. You now know who to call if you need any parts or upgrades. Right?"

Jumper chuckled, giving a shake of his head, and steered them towards the exit. Matrix was on the ball, drawing the neon ladder down above the hospital's doors.

Despite it being the crack of dawn, a small audience had gathered outside, their eyes on the sky as they stared at Wildcard Gamma in fascination. A group of children stood at the front, bouncing up and down as the ladder descended.

When Macro stepped outside, the audience broke into a cheer, and not the kind of cheer one hears when a bounty had been obtained. This one was genuine, happy, grateful cheering.

Macro stiffened and stared dumbfounded at the crowd.

"Okay," he said. "This is surreal. I'm going home."

He grabbed onto the ladder and climbed up a few rungs to allow Anchor and DL to join him. He gave one last look down at Jumper and smirked.

"Thanks for everything, Gov," he said.

"No. Thank you, Macro." Jumper returned his smile and saluted. The gesture almost sent the space pirate falling from the ladder. "See you again soon. I'll keep you updated on Switch's progress."

Macro let out a nervous laugh and turned his eyes onto the hulking wishiwashi. The ladder ascended and Matrix landed gracefully two

rungs above him. Within no time flat, they were back on board Wildcard Gamma.

The door closed behind them, but unlike the rest of his crew he didn't look back down at the city. Not because he didn't want to, but because he knew full well if he did he'd want to go back.

With a sigh, he drew the disk from his belt. "Well, I guess we'd better get this installed in you, eh DL?"

DL shifted uneasily and slumped into the cockpit. Before Macro could reach it, Cookie poked his head out of the kitchen door.

"You're back!" His jovial smile fell and he looked at Anchor aghast. "What on earth happened down there?!"

"We'll fill you in later," said Macro. "It's a long story."

"Oh good. We haven't had a night time story in a while." Cookie waved his ladle. "I'll make extra helpings just for that!"

Macro waved the slurpuff off and joined his crew in the cockpit. Anchor leant back in his chair with a sigh.

"Oh, it's like putting on a second skin," he said. "Where too, Cap'n?"

"I dunno yet," said Macro. "I'm thinking Pulse City. Get some fuel, and maybe a burger at Moonlight Lounge."

He handed the disk to Matrix and sank into his seat, kicking his feet up on the dashboard.

Soft, fluffy clouds drifted by, painted orange from the rising sun. It wouldn't be long until Cyan City was far behind them.

"Whoa, Cap'n!" Anchor's cry drew Macro out of his reverie.

He followed the granbull's paw to something in the distance. Something squid-like flew away from them, its long tentacles pulsing

back and forth behind it as it swam through the sky. It was nothing like Macro had ever seen.

"Think it's another of Socket's little victims?" Macro asked. "Something else to toy with since we took DL and her human away?"

"I dunno." Anchor scratched his head. "What do you suggest we do?"

Macro nibbled on a claw as he watched the creature drift further away from them. None of them knew what it was, yet none of them had ever seen a human before either. Of course, Switch had been disguised as a talonflame. What if this was another human trapped in the form of some unseen pokemon?

"I say we catch it," said Macro. "I ain't letting Socket have the satisfaction of catching some other innocent creature."

"We don't even know if she wants this thing," said Anchor. "I mean… there's no government fleet pursuing it."

"Catch it anyway." Macro shrugged. "There's every chance it wants to get back home like Switch does. Wherever home is. And what if she is trying to catch it? If we beat her again, then that'll just add to the fun."

"All right." Anchor pushed the steering stick forwards. "Let's catch the jellyfish thing."

Matrix looked up from his computer. One paw held the jack lead, but DL had rose to her feet to join Macro's side.

"It's so beautiful," she said. "Almost translucent. Look how the sun reflects off its body."

"Anything in your data banks about this thing?" Macro asked her.

She shook her head, but her eyes wouldn't leave the creature.

"Are you sure about this?" Matrix asked. "We don't know what that thing even is."

"If this has anything to do with Socket opening time and space," said Macro, "then it's probably a pokemon from another world."

"But what if that world is hostile?"

Macro ignored him, keeping his eyes on the strange pokemon. Wildcard Gamma gradually caught up with it, and the jaws of the ship opened wide to trap the creature. In seconds, the tentacled pokemon was safely in their cargo hold.

"All right." Macro slipped from his seat with DL in tow. "Let's go see if we can talk to it. Find out where it's come from."

Matrix watched him, winding his antenna around in his paw so tightly Macro worried he might pull it off.

"You two ain't goin' alone, Cap'n," said Anchor.

"I wasn't planning on it."

Macro paused by the door and looked back at the ribombee. His wings buzzed as he lifted himself off his seat.

"Matrix, you stay here with DL," said Macro. "I might need you in the cockpit."

Matrix shrugged and landed back in his seat with a plop. "Sure. I don't even wanna know what that thing is. It looks like something from a horror game."

Macro tutted then followed Anchor down the corridor towards the loot room. DL's soft footsteps followed after them and Macro looked back over his shoulder at her.

"I told you to stay with Matrix," he said.

She shook her head and slipped past him, catching up with the granbull. Macro muttered under his breath and plodded behind them until they reached the door. One scan of the mawile's paw opened it and he slipped in ahead of them. Before they could reach the next door, a loud crash came from beyond it and the entire ship shook. Macro's heart lurched into his throat and he flashed the next door open. Had the creature hurt itself? He raced down the stairs towards it. Another crash sent him rolling head over heels down the remaining steps until he landed in a heap at the metal door.

"Cap'n!"

Anchor dived down the stairs after him, but it was DL who appeared at his side first. She placed a warm paw on his shoulder and he looked up, meeting her eyes.

"I'm fine," Macro muttered.

She took his paw and pulled him to his feet. Anchor stared at the door, his paws balled into fists.

"I dunno what to think of this," he said. "Somethin' don't smell right."

Macro took a deep breath and reached for the door panel. "Well, I'm giving this thing the benefit of the doubt. It's probably terrified, and if it understands us then-"

The door slid open, revealing the vast cargo hold. The jellyfish creature swam in circles, but when it spotted them it froze in the air. Its tentacles drooped down beneath it, reminiscent of legs and arms.

Macro folded his arms and cocked his head to one side. "Not seen anythin' like you before."

A tinkly cry came from the creature, and it waved its tentacles in a fluid motion. Had it understood him?

"Are you a pokemon? Or a human?"

DL slipped past him, her eyes locked on the creature.

"Well, whatever you are," said Macro, "Socket can't hurt you here. So-"

A red glow emanated from the creature, reflecting from the walls of the cargo hold. Then like a flash it lurched towards them. Macro whipped DL behind him and span to the side, slamming his paw over the door panel. The door shut just before the creature reached them. It bounced off the metal with an almighty clang, leaving a huge dent protruding from the surface. Anchor's eyes widened and he looked from the damaged door to Macro.

Clang after clang came from within the cargo hold. Macro clutched the pachirisu to his chest and shouted into his ear piece.

"Matrix! It's hostile! Let it out and fire! Fire!"

The noise coming from the cargo hold was unbearable. His heart leapt with every crash and he screwed his eyes shut.

It seemed to go on for an eternity. Then it ended. The silence was almost deafening.

Macro looked up, his breath coming in heavy bursts.

"Did you hit it?" he asked Matrix.

The ribombee's voice resonated in his ear, "Nah. I missed."

"You missed?" Macro hissed.

"Hey, I might be able to use the controls in here, but I'm not a good shot."

"All them video games didn't teach you anything?" Macro sighed. "What's happened to the creature?"

"It got away."

Macro leant his head back against the wall and ran a paw over his face. The darn thing got away… Little claws dug into his chest and he opened his eyes again, meeting DL's frightened chocolate gaze. All his fear melted away to be replaced with a burning battle spirit.

"Where is it going?" he asked Matrix.

"Pulse City."

Macro's heart sank. He exchanged glances with Anchor and the granbull nodded.

"We'll beat it there, Cap'n." He trudged up the stairs, flinching slightly on his burned leg.

Pulse City… Macro groaned and rubbed at his scar. What had he got himself into? He cracked an eye open, fixing it on DL's terrified face. Her little nose twitched and she glanced away from him towards the damaged door.

His blood froze in his veins. Everything suddenly seemed a lot darker.

All this had started when he'd picked up that box. What would have happened if he'd left it? One thing was for certain. He'd be blissfully unaware.

But it was too late now. He was already in too deep.

She shifted again, feeling tiny under his paw. The scent of lavender wafted up from her fur, dusting away that dark cloud and stirring something else entirely deep inside his stomach. He couldn't be doing with this. It frightened him. The wild emotions the pachirisu caused him were a cocktail of confusion.

His muzzle creased and he shoved her aside, marching up the steps towards the cockpit. He only paused to let her out of the loot room so he could make sure it locked behind her.

Once he reached the cockpit, he fell into his seat with a heavy sigh.

"Sorry," said Matrix flatly. "Don't ask me to fire the guns again."

"Don't worry, I won't." Macro turned his head to look at him. "Hurry up and get that disk installed on DL."

"But…" DL stuttered and faltered in the doorway. "But I told you I don't want it."

"You're having it!" he snapped. "The deal was we'd get your memories and in return you'd work for me. So you can stick to our deal and take them, and be flippin' happy about it, all right?! Besides, the sooner you get them all back the sooner you're done."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked.

"Wasn't it clear enough?" He turned away from her and leant back in his seat. "Once all this is over, I want you gone."

Macro could feel Anchor's eyes burning into the side of his head.

"Where's this come from, Cap'n?"

The granbull's voice was quiet, but Macro was fairly certain the entire cockpit heard it. Nevertheless, he didn't answer. He closed his eyes and tucked his paws behind his head.

"Fine." DL's voice wavered. "I'll take my memories and then I'll leave, if that's what you want."

Macro shrugged, but somehow her words stabbed him. It wasn't her fault. None of this was her fault.

He cracked one eye open and caught her reflection in the window as she sat at Matrix's feet. The ribombee plugged the jack in place and Macro let his eyes close again. Why was it so hard to apologize?

"This one looks rather big," said Matrix. "It might take a while."

No… it wasn't fair. She said she didn't want it, so why was he forcing it on her?

Macro licked his lips and ventured a glance back at them. But before he could say anything, DL's entire body stiffened. The antenna behind her ear flashed erratically and her eyes turned lifeless. Then her mouth flapped open and closed at an alarming rate, throwing out a stream of nonsense.

Matrix dropped his computer and buzzed into the air, hovering as he wound an antenna round in his paw. His eyes traced over the pachirisu then he looked back at Macro.

Macro leapt over the back of his seat and dived to catch DL as she fell backwards onto the floor. Anchor rose to his feet, looking at each pokemon in turn.

"What's happening?" Macro barked at Matrix.

Matrix looked from him to DL. "I… I don't know." He swooped from the air to snatch up his computer and his eyes widened. "It's frozen."

Macro stared up at him, his mouth hanging open. DL's incomprehensible babble filled the cockpit, driving his anxiety sky high. He wasn't a computer whizz like Matrix, but there was one thing he knew about computers… if they froze, they needed a reboot.

He grit his teeth together and reached behind DL's head, flicking her switch into the off position. Her body went limp in his arms, but in the silence that followed he could hear his own heart beating. Racing at a mile a minute. He took a deep breath and switched her back on.

But she just lay there. Lifeless.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 39

A/N - Sorry for the short hiatus! I got rather bogged down with an increased workload and needed to take a break from updating while I finished writing Arc 4. I've not finished Arc 4 yet, but I'm far enough into it that I can justify returning to regular updates. Sorry this opening chapter is a bit on the short side. I needed to get the different story threads moving for what I hope you will find to be an exciting roller coaster of an arc! Thanks again for all faves, reviews and follows!

Arc 4 - Reign of the Ultra Beasts

Chapter 39

Troll's face twisted as he stared at the computer screen. A combination of fear and anger. Sweat radiated off him in a cloud of stench that Socket could smell from her view behind the one-way window. His paw trembled over the touch screen panel, occasionally brushing against it and bringing up random text on the holoscreen.

The gothitelle's eyes wandered to the timer, not for the first time. Thirty seconds. The croagunk criminal had only thirty seconds left, and he was losing them rapidly. A small movement caught her eye and she watched a bead of sweat trickle down the back of his neck and over his hunched shoulders where it vanished into the modest chair cushion.

"I don't think he's got this." The grumpig officer took a bite out of his donut. It was a good thing the croagunk couldn't hear a word they said. "Either that or he's willingly throwing his life away."

Socket hmm'd and pursed her lips together. "Or he's on to me."

"I doubt that," said the officer. "You were pretty convincing. I don't even think our lie detectors could have given you away."

Socket hmm'd again then leant back in her seat. It creaked loudly and she leant forwards again, fearing the flimsy furniture would give way.

"Always told you ya should've got a job in acting." Tweak hopped from the donut box and shook himself loudly, sending sprinkles all over the table. "That snack should last me until tea time."

Socket recoiled and raised a paw to dust stray sticky strands from her velvet fur. "I brought you here understanding you were taking notes."

Tweak didn't so much as flinch at her warning note. Instead he beamed and nodded to her bag.

"I would, but you never returned my notebook," he said.

Socket shot him a leer and looked back out of the window. The timer let out a loud ring, snatching her attention away from Troll's trembling body.

The officer silenced it with a heavy paw then switched on his microphone.

"Time's up," he said. "Step away from the display."

Troll muttered something incoherent and pushed himself to his feet. He shuffled backwards from the computer and shot a leer at the one-way window.

The three pokemon flowed from the soundproofed room and gathered around the croagunk. He gave them a venomous look but didn't move from his spot. The three psychic types were a gentle reminder that he didn't need cuffs to be restrained. His severe weakness alone was his restraint, and he was greatly outnumbered.

The officer checked the display and nodded slowly.

"Looks like you failed," he said.

"Were a weird-ass test." Troll sneered at the mayor. "Those stakes spoke numbers that you want me dead. You know I ain't guilty, you just want to fry us poison types in your sick chair."

"I take no pleasure in killing you," said Socket. "Your plight is in your own paws."

"What you talkin' about?" Troll balled his paws into fists. "You know full well you could help us but you just don't wanna."

"I'd watch what you're saying when your life is in my paws." Socket folded her arms and locked her icy gaze on his, putting out the fire behind it. "You failed the test. You were meant to succeed."

Troll's lips curled into a sneer. "You're a real sicko, you know that?"

The officer turned his back on the computer and leant against the desk. "Every single attempt was a fail. You weren't even close. It's as though you don't even know the basics."

"And you do?" Troll rounded on the grumpig.

The officer shrugged. "I know a little. I have to, given this is my job. I couldn't even begin to hack government files, however. Those fire walls and barriers… That's advanced stuff."

"I feel like you three set me up." Troll clenched his teeth together and roared. "Right, fine! Take me back to the cell. Do me in. Do whatever you flippin' well want. Anythin's better than livin' in this toxic dump!"

"No." Socket moved towards him, daring not to breathe as the toxic sweat from his body permeated the very air around him. "You failed that test. That means only one thing."

"I'm a dead 'mon."

"Not at all. It means you weren't the one who hacked into my systems."

"Eh?" Troll's jaw went slack.

"You don't have a clue, do you?" Socket tapped her claws along her arm as she examined the dumbfounded amphibian. "This was a test. Of course you'd hack if your life depended on it. I needed to give you those stakes to get answers."

"So you tricked me?!"

He span to face her fully and the officer leapt back from the desk to her aid. Socket raised a paw and the grumpig backed down, standing no more than two feet away from her and the criminal.

"Yes, I tricked you," said Socket. "Your life is safe. But!" She froze his words before they left his mouth, leaving it hanging open like a victreebell's trap. "That doesn't mean you're off the hook. If you want a reduced sentence, you have to give me some answers."

"What answers?" The croagunk folded his arms and met her icy stare head on. "What could a humble little dealer livin' in the outskirts have to offer System's Mayor?"

"Oh, you could offer me many things," said Socket. "The location of every single wanted criminal living on System Ground, for example. The source off all your toxic sludge dens." A small smile spread across her lips and she stared at the croagunk until he cowered back from her. "But that's for another time. Right now I want you to tell me everything you know about Surge."

His eyes widened and he looked back up at her with a start. "Surge? What do you wanna know about her?"

"Given I've foolishly hired her," said Socket slowly, "I want to know everything."

…

"I know I said I wanted you gone…" Macro's voice cracked. "But this isn't what I meant!"

It wasn't the first time he'd said it. He'd lost track of how long he'd been sat beside DL's bed watching her. Waiting for any sign she might wake up.

But there was none. The only thing that reassured him she was alive was her breathing. She looked just like she was sleeping, except there were no eye twitches. Nothing moved except her chest with every breath she took.

It pained him. His mother often told him to be careful what he wished for. He'd spoken off the cuff… and look what had happened.

He let his head fall into his paws and rubbed them over his face, trying to stem any tears. He wasn't even sure he had any left.

The door whirred open and he snatched his paws from his eyes, looking up to meet Anchor's concerned face. The granbull strolled across the room and his eyes went from Macro to DL.

"Not woken up yet?" It was a rather redundant question to ask.

Macro sighed and shook his head. He leant back in his seat and let his paws flop into his lap.

"I'm at a loss of what to do." He looked over at his computer lying on the bedside table.

Matrix hadn't a clue how to 'fix' DL. If it was an issue with the database, then it was a computer issue. But one that was out of the ribombee's expertise. If it required hacking into her to examine, there was only one pokemon he knew could possibly help them. And she'd not been answering his calls. It had been well over an hour since he messaged her to call him urgently.

"I think we're all at a loss," said Anchor. "If it's any consolation, Matrix has been tryin' to look for problems in the disks. But he says he can't see anything in the code that rings any warning bells. They all look alike. Nothing alien about them."

"It could be hidden amongst it, camouflaged," said Macro. "Anyone could have jeopardised the disk to get back at me."

"What makes you think they'd be getting back at you? It's DL's memories, not yours."

"Because I'm the one who wants them!" Macro's violet glare locked on Anchor. "Not her! I'm forcing them on her!"

"It ain't your fault, you got her best interests at heart. Right?" Anchor paused as he watched Macro sigh and look away. "You ain't seriously still thinkin' Jumper did this are you? Or someone else in Cyan City?"

"Yes. I am. It's where we got the disk from, and that frogadier went from refusing to give me the disk to rewarding me with it." Macro rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I shouldn't have trusted them so easily."

"Well I still don't think it were them," said Anchor. "What if they didn't even know there were something wrong with it? You said there were too many locations on that list to match the number of disks. What if this one were a fake one?"

Macro jolted. "You mean this could be the red herring?"

"Maybe. Or the right disk but coded wrong. Matrix thinks it could be something as simple as a typo in the data."

"How can someone's brain have a typo?" Macro asked sourly.

Anchor shrugged. "I dunno. We all so easily make them." When Macro said nothing, he went on. "Matrix described it like this. When

you install a new operating system on your computer, if something goes wrong where it don't read right, it can cause the whole system to fail at start up."

"This failed while it was downloading."

Anchor scratched his head and sighed. "Look. He's tryin' to help. We all are. But we ain't gonna get answers without a thorough search. Have you found anyone who can help her?"

"I might have. But she hasn't got back to me."

"Ah. Well, let's hope she does soon." Anchor turned to the door, then paused to look back at Macro. Just A heads up, Cookie rang the lunch bell fifteen minutes ago. If you're quick, there might still be some left."

"I'm not hungry."

"All right." Anchor cleared his throat and tucked his paws behind his back. "But you also missed breakfast."

Macro shrugged his shoulders.

Anchor sighed and scratched his mohawk. "I know it ain't easy, but you have to eat something."

"I'll eat when I'm ready."

"Fair enough." Anchor slipped from the room, letting the door hiss shut behind him.

Macro leant back in his chair and groaned, running his paws over his face. His stomach was in knots. He couldn't eat anything if he tried.

Suddenly, the room filled with a jaunty jingle. He sat bolt upright and groped for his computer. He almost dropped it to the floor when he saw the name. 'Surge', perched above the dancing symbol of a

ringing phone. He pressed it to his ear and answered as confidently as his worn out voice would allow.

"Surge! Finally."

"What do you want, Macro?" Her voice was so icy it sent chills through his entire body.

"I don't know what's got your gogoat," he said, "but I've not been messaging you for a chat. I actually need your help."

"Oh?" She paused and for a dreaded moment he thought she'd hung up. "It's gonna cost you."

"You don't even know what it is yet," he said.

"No, but I don't do favors."

He grit his teeth together. "I got that much from my last request."

"Anyway. What is it?"

"Remember that living computer I told you about?" His eyes went to DL. "We've been trying to retrieve her memory disks and… well, something's gone wrong with the third one. She won't wake up."

"You've killed her?" Surge didn't sound remotely surprised, and along with her choice of words, it stabbed at him.

"No. I…" He paused and choked back a sob. "I don't know!"

"How do you expect me to help? I'm not a medic."

"No, but you're a hacker, right? You can get into that… computer thing… in her head and find out what's gone wrong. Right?"

Surge sighed and he heard her scratch her ear. "I don't know. That kind of goes beyond my realms of expertise."

"So you won't do it?" He let his disappointment hang in the air.

"I didn't say that. But we're not talking about a computer here, we're talking about someone's brain. If anything goes wrong and I end up killing her, I'll be tried for murder."

"It's not murder if you're trying to save her life. How many pokemon die in hospitals during surgery or resuscitation? It's the same stinkin' thing!"

"No it's not. I'm not a doctor. It'll be malpractice."

Macro clenched his jaw together. "Let's not get into the legalities behind this, considering what's been done to her is already illegal! I'm asking you to help her as best as anyone possibly can!"

Surge was silent for a long while, and he heard the creak of a chair or bed as she moved on it.

"Okay, Macro. I'll help her."

His heart leapt into his throat with such force he almost left his seat. "You will? Oh man, you have no idea-"

"But it's not free."

His heart sank again and he slumped into the chair. "How much? Where do you want me to take you this time?"

"We'll discuss that when you get here. I'm in Pulse City, staying at number twelve Neon House. It's opposite Moonlight Lounge."

Before he could reply, she cut him off.

His arm went limp over the arm of the chair, still clutching his computer. He looked up at DL, still 'sleeping'.

He reached over and took her paw in both of his. Still warm. Still alive.

So, Surge would help her.

Somehow the idea filled him with both hope and dread.

…

Surge stared at her computer, her claw still pressed over the spot the 'hang up' option had been. Macro's words still rang around her head.

He wanted her help, and he'd sounded desperate.

Everything she'd heard about Hunter, from long before her bounty hunting days, he'd never struck her as the kind of pokemon who'd genuinely care for another. And from the day he'd hired her, everything she thought she'd known had turned out to be a lie. Even his 'name'.

She stuffed her computer into her pocket and let out a long sigh. Her head was a mess. Socket had hired her to turn in the space pirate, even if it meant taking his life. If she didn't… well, Socket wasn't exactly the kind of pokemon you wanted to make angry. The thought alone left a bitter taste in Surge's mouth. Someone's life would be taken, and it would be Macro's or her own.

Yes, she'd help the pachirisu. But she'd be using her as bait for an elaborate trap.

…

Tracer puffed on his cigar, his eyes fixed on the sky. Or what he could see of it through the yellow smog. He stood with his back against his office wall, the cool brick penetrating the heavy leather of his trench coat.

He'd seen it take off, that strange pyukumuku-shaped ship. That meant the human had left System Ground, and going off the state of the house, so had the pokemon she'd befriended.

She was up to something. Something he felt he needed to put an end to. But it hadn't felt right to catch her and turn her in.

'That mayor said something about taking me to a lab. I spent years with four white walls around me. I ain't bein' locked in no lab. Capiche?'

Her words had left him feeling cold inside. What was Socket planning to do? Was it really idle curiosity or something much more sinister? One thing was for certain. Something was going on in System, and his investigator instinct was itching to get to the bottom of it.

The door was thrown wide open and Widget strolled outside, struggling to fasten his mask over his face. He fixed a perplexed eye on Tracer and snorted, shaking the mask to the floor.

"I wanna call hypocrisy!" The eevee pointed an accusing paw. "You always tell me to wear a mask, and you aren't wearing one!"

Tracer blew out a stream of smoke, keeping his eyes on the sky. "I'm thinking, Widget."

"And the masks prevent that. Got it."

"It's not that." The delphox flicked ash onto the floor. "There's a lot to go over, and I needed to calm my nerves."

Widget sat down heavily and shook out his fur, briefly revealing the everstone embedded in his sternum.

"It stinks rotten," he said. "What happened overnight?"

"My guess is they dumped more waste in the back streets," said Tracer. "Even your mask wouldn't filter out the stench. Which you do still need to wear, by the way."

"I'll put mine on when you put on yours," said Widget. "Hypocrite."

Tracer glanced down at the eevee, receiving a playful grin. The delphox sighed and flicked more ash to the floor.

"This is about that human, ain't it?" Widget asked.

"Yes. I believe she's now in System Sky." Tracer looked back up at the yellow clouds. "How on earth we're meant to go after her now confounds me."

Widget made a thoughtful noise. "Surge has a ship."

"I know. But she's not been returning my calls."

"Keep mithering."

"That's not my style." Tracer took another drag of his cigar. "Nor is it hers to put up with constant badgering."

Widget let out a whiny sigh and sat back on his haunches to lean against the wall. "Well I'm at a loss."

"Join the club."

"You thought about hiring?" Defrag's head appeared around the door. Her nose twitched at the stench then almost retreated back into her face. "Okay, I was baffled enough when you used the term to begin with, but this is your idea of 'fresh air'?!"

"I needed to think," said Tracer. "And inside was too stuffy."

"At least the air is filtered." Defrag flicked her long ears back and fixed pink eyes on his. "Anyway. Like I was saying. You could hire a ship?"

"From who?" Tracer stubbed his cigar on the wall then pulled out another, prompting a raised eyebrow from the lopunny. "Ships are primarily a space pirate thing. Unless you're suggesting I ask Socket to lend me a government ship?"

"Couldn't hurt," said Defrag. "She's asked you to track this human down. If she still wants you to catch her, she needs you to get into the sky."

"Good point." Widget looked up at Tracer. "She does want this human, so I'm sure she'd be more than willing."

Tracer took a long drag of his fresh cigar and looked back up at the sky. Hiring a government ship? It wasn't an unreasonable request, given the circumstances. Of course, he'd need to lie a little. There was no way he was going to rush the human girl to Socket, not without better knowledge of what might befall the poor creature.

"Okay," he said. "It's a move I hadn't really considered. But I'm assuming Socket will lend me a ship given the human she's requested I catch for her has zipped off into the unknown."

"And you don't have wings," said Widget.

"Even bird pokemon can't fly all the way into System Sky, Widget."

"Do you even know how to drive one?" Defrag asked.

"As far as I know, air ships are pretty intuitive," said Tracer.

"All right, so long as you don't suddenly crash and burn."

Tracer shrugged and said nothing, fumbling in his deep pockets for his computer.

Defrag frowned at the dingy streets. "Well I've said my piece. I'm going back inside before my lungs rot."

"See ya later then!" The eevee watched the door slam shut then fixed Tracer with a grin. "So, we're hiring a ship, eh?"

Tracer made a grunt of acknowledgment and pulled up Socket's name on his computer, bracing himself for the potential earful he was about to receive.

"Ooh, this is so exciting!" Widget squealed and shifted his weight rapidly from paw to paw. "Can I drive?"

Tracer's cigar almost fell from his mouth and he cleared his throat before hitting the dial button. The eevee's sparkling eyes fixed on the side of his head. This all felt like a set up for potential disaster.

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 40

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter 40

Sheets of paper littered Socket's desk. Every single note both the Proxy Prison officer and Tweak had scrawled had been transcribed on her computer and printed off for easier reading. Everything had been bullet pointed, listing each and every task Surge had completed. Well… every task that had wormed its way around the outskirts. Troll could only tell her what he knew, and given he desperately wanted that reduced sentence, he'd been a fountain of knowledge.

Assassinations. Burglaries. Illegal trade deals. Ship hijacking and scrapping. Bounty hunting.

Hacking.

There it was. The key crime. Surge was, in every sense of the word, a professional hacker.

And Socket had hired her.

'I never miss my target.'

Of course not. An assassin never would.

Her eyes wandered to the photo of the molten magnezone fleet poking out beneath a wad of discarded paperwork. There was only one logical answer Socket had for that scenario. As much as a bounty hunter like Surge would lust after a huge price tag on a space pirate, she'd deliberately missed her target and shot the magnezone instead. But why?

It was as clear as day now that Hunter had hired Surge to obtain information on Download Database, including the locations of her memory disks. But wasn't he just another client to the 'jack-of-all-trades'?

A soft knock at Socket's door drew her out of her deep, analyzing thoughts. She already knew who it was, and despite whether it was good news or bad, it still offered her a break.

"Come in," she said.

The door cracked open and Yobi slipped through a gap she thought was much too small for the raichu. The action reminded her of a muk sliding through a drain.

"What do you want?" she asked icily.

"It's done," he said.

"What's done?"

"The virus," he said. "I sent it out this morning."

That got her attention. She lowered her pen and steepled her paws together. "So Download Database is now disabled?"

"I assume so. I designed it so it would render her inoperable, but I don't know what affects it will have on her. I couldn't exactly test it, you see."

"So you have no idea if it's damaged Download Database or not?" Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Seems rather irresponsible."

"I know, but there was nothing I could test it on. And I needed to make sure it got through Zero Day quickly enough to not damage them, either. They're already unstable as it is."

Socket huffed and retrieved her pen. "So long as Hunter is no longer able to follow our every move, then I can deem it a job well done.

Now we just have to wait until Download Database is back in our paws."

Yobi shifted his weight from foot to foot. "And what of the human girl? Is she still part of this plan?"

Socket looked up at him again and frowned. "That human has a death sentence. Tracer is on that job, so she's out of my paws."

"You aren't wanting to use her, too, then?"

"I might do. It seems a fitting revenge plan. She'd be considered dead whatever the outcome."

"Good grief!" Tweak dropped his stamp and looked up at them. "All she did was hit you."

Socket's eyes flew to the chingling, locking him in a blazing fury. But all he did was laugh as he retrieved his stamp, returning eagerly to his work and all the while creating the most obnoxious jingle.

Socket sighed and shook her head, turning her attention back to Yobi. "Is there any way to find out what state Download Database is now in?"

He scratched behind his ear and fixed his gaze on the window. "Not really. The androids can't connect to her any more. I asked BackDoor to check and he's getting nothing. And with her tracking chip being disabled, she's not going to be easy to retrieve either."

"Well, that's Surge's problem."

Surge…

Socket looked back down at her paperwork, but the text just blurred together as her mind went elsewhere. She should probably fill Yobi in on their recent discovery… She shook her head sharply and blinked her paperwork back into focus.

"Our priority now is part two of my plan," she said. "If I have to wait any longer for a convenient android to fill me in on all the details, we'll never get started. So we may as well make progress while I wait."

"I'm guessing BackDoor is still doing a good enough job at keeping you updated on the progress?" Yobi asked.

She pursed her lips together. "He complains a lot. But as a temporary means, it's fine. And I mean… temporary."

Yobi nodded and took a step back towards the door. "I'll continue work on this new android then. That might speed things up."

"What's this one's function?" Socket asked.

A small smile tugged at the corner of Yobi's lips. "To keep pests at bay."

Socket looked up with a start. "So it's an anti-pirate weapon?"

"Of sorts."

Yobi gave her a wave and let the door close after him, leaving Socket to only wonder what exactly the raichu was up to.

…

Wildcard Gamma pulled in neatly at Pulse City's docks, gliding between a gorebyss ship and another themed around an eelektross.

Anchor opened the hatch and mounted the neon ladder, which formed itself into a small staircase. But before he descended he looked back over his shoulder at Macro. The mawile stood trembling slightly under DL's weight. The small squirrel pokemon lay clutched in his arms, but despite her slight form she wasn't much smaller than Macro.

The granbull cleared his throat and scratched his chin with a claw. "You sure you don't want me to carry her?"

"I'm fine," said Macro. "Lead the way, I'll follow."

"You don't look fine," said Matrix as he buzzed over his head to follow Anchor off the ship.

Macro stifled a tut and slowly and carefully descended the neon steps. It took a lot of forward planning since he couldn't see very far past DL. He wobbled slightly on the second-to-last step. In a desperate bid of faith, he threw himself onto the docks and staggered forwards. Something tugged the back of his scarf and he yelped, finding himself dragged backwards into Anchor's steady paw.

"Whoa!" A warm body brushed Macro's foot as someone dived for safety. "Watch where you're stepping!"

Macro's eyes flew to the tiny form of Worm. The sewaddle leered up at him as he thumped his stubby tail on the floor. Macro clutched DL tightly, his heart hammering in his chest.

"Sorry," the granbull grunted. "That were a bit discourteous of me, Cap'n, but I ain't scoopin' you both off the bottom of the dome."

"But you're fine scraping me off the stinkin' docks?" Worm rolled his eyes. "No one thinks about us little pokemon. You're just a load of huge, stompy feet to us."

"That's why I fly," said Matrix.

"Anyway." Worm locked his eyes on Macro's. "I saw your ship coming in. Wondered if you fancied a drink."

Macro shook his head and pulled himself away from Anchor. "Sorry. I've got stuff to do."

"You sellin' that… erm…" Worm pointed a foot at DL.

"No, I am not selling her." Macro frowned. "What monster do you take me for?"

"Oh! It's organic?" Worm chuckled. "I'm sorry. I thought it were one of them fancy new androids and you were trading it for parts."

"Got your hopes a little high then, huh?" Macro turned his back on him and made for the street. "That new technology doesn't just drop out of the sky."

"One can hope." Worm wriggled after them, huffing and puffing as he struggled to keep up. "So. Drinks later, then? What, may I ask, is wrong with the girl?"

"Dunno."

Worm turned to Anchor but the granbull merely shrugged.

"Well, it must be serious if you're having to carry her like a hatchling!" said Worm.

"It's not something we can really talk about," said Matrix. "Anyway. You might want to let everyone know to keep their eyes on the skies. Something is heading this way and we're worried it might be hostile."

"Oh drat. It ain't that thing that's been attacking cities is it?"

Every muscle in Macro's body stiffened and he clenched his jaw. With all the chaos concerning DL, he'd forgotten about that alien creature.

"It's been attacking cities?" Anchor asked.

"Aye. It totally wrecked Favicon City," said Worm. "Pirates have since swooped in to loot the place dry, so don't get your hopes up. There's nowt left. As for the other cities, they've received… well… a glancing blow in comparison. I guess it pays to be prepared."

"Well, prepare yourselves," said Macro. "Once we've dropped DL off, we'll be back out to help you if you need it."

"Have you seen it?" Worm asked. "Is it as monstrous as the reports say?"

Macro's muzzle crinkled. "It looks like someone got a tentacruel, jellicent and ditto, merged them all together then gave it a rock hard shell. Thing trashed my cargo bay."

"You tried to catch it?! Are you a moron?!"

Macro grunted and marched on. "Sometimes I wonder."

Worm huffed and came to a stop, gasping to catch his breath. "Well. Someone's a martyr today."

Macro rounded the corner onto the main street running through Pulse City. The huge sign for Moonlight Lounge stood on his right. He scoured the building names and numbers on the opposite side of the road, searching for Neon House. It wasn't hard to miss. The large apartment block stood almost opposite the Lounge, and running up the side of the door was a control panel with a bell for each apartment.

He juggled DL in his arms, straining to reach the panel.

Anchor placed a paw on his horn, stopping him. "What number?"

"Twelve," Macro muttered.

Anchor's huge claw drowned the tiny bell, and a deep buzz came from the panel's speaker. Within no time, Surge's voice rang out at them.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"It's me," Macro responded.

Surge 'hmm'd' and clicked her tongue. "Hardly narrows it down."

"It's Macro. Let me in."

There was a painful pause, and Macro shuffled his feet as he stared up at the door. He half wondered if he should buzz again, then the door beeped and clicked.

Anchor wrenched it open, and Macro trotted inside, followed closely by Matrix. Macro paused, checking over the sign for the room numbers. Twelve was on the first floor. Since he was carrying DL, that meant he needed the elevator.

Anchor called it down and leant against the wall, folding his arms.

"You know, Cap'n," he said. "You've not told us much about this Surge. Are you sure we can trust her?"

Macro sighed and watched the elevator as it came down from the fourth floor. "She's helped me a few times. She's the one who fired the torpedo when we stole DL. I'd say we can trust her more than most other pokemon in this city."

Matrix looked up from his game with surprise, and Anchor scratched at his mohawk.

"She fired it? Well…" He cleared his throat. "Guess I don't need to worry, then?"

The elevator let out a cheerful chime and its doors rattled open. The lone light flickered, causing their shadows to dance over the peeling walls. As it rose, the entire cabin shook and Macro had to steady himself against the wall. When the doors opened again, the elevator wasn't quite in line with the floor and he had to lift his foot to climb out else risk sprawling over the already cracked tiles.

Number twelve was right beside the elevator. Macro let Anchor knock, his huge paw almost sending the door off its hinges. Surge

answered, her eyes narrowed into slits. But her expression softened when she saw Macro and his unconscious burden.

"Bring her inside." She vanished back beyond the door.

No 'hello'. No pleasantries. She was as blunt as she had been on the phone. Macro sighed and followed the zigzagoon into her apartment. It was sparse of decoration, unless her weapons counted as such. Pots and pans lay in a heap in the sink and her bed was still unmade.

Anchor let out a long whistle and nudged Macro with his elbow. "You found a pretty one."

Macro grit his teeth together and gave Anchor a violet leer. He clutched DL tightly and trotted to catch up with Surge.

She tossed the sheet aside for him to set DL down. He slipped her onto the mattress and gently shoved her along so she was away from the edge.

"You've certainly got a lot of toys." Anchor looked over the vast array of weapons.

"They're not toys, so don't touch anything." She then turned to Macro. "So, you - What on earth have you got on your scarf?"

Macro looked down at himself and let out a long, pained groan. White powdery residue clung to his black and blue scarf in unsightly clumps reminiscent of fungus. Of course, none of his crew had said anything. Anchor was about as observant as a sock unless it concerned something he was interested in. Macro would like to say the same for Matrix, but he likely noticed and kept quiet for a laugh.

"It's caterpie silk." Macro beat it down and it flaked away under his paw, leaving behind grey marks.

Surge stared at him, her mouth slightly open as she watched him struggle to straighten the fabric back out.

He cleared his throat and waved a paw in dismissal. "It's a long story."

She shook her head and sighed. "Anyway. You said she froze? Something to do with a disk you installed."

"Yeh." His eyes went over to DL briefly. "But before we get into that, I suppose I should introduce you to the rest of my crew." He turned to look at Surge then nodded at the other two pokemon. "This is Anchor. He's my weapons expert, pilot and ship engineer. You already know Matrix."

"Oh yes." Surge leant back against the kitchenette counter. "I know the cute bug."

If Matrix was embarrassed, he didn't show it. He reached into his small bag and pulled out the disks.

"I've gone over these," the ribombee explained. "I can't find anything wrong with them. No discrepancies in the coding. My only assumption is there's a typo or missing command somewhere."

Surge took the disks and rifled through them. "There's nothing written on them to even say what they are."

"They're her memory disks," said Macro. "Socket obviously wanted to make them hard to find."

"And low key," Anchor added.

"They've also been locked," said Surge. "So no one can erase or write over them."

Macro took one of the square black disks off her and looked over it. Sure enough, the safety tag normally located in the top right corner

had not only been moved into its 'lock' position, it had been broken away. A permanent measure often found on video games.

"That means if anything is wrong with this recent disk," said Surge, "whichever one it is, then it will be impossible to fix."

"That means it downloaded with an error?" Macro asked. "Or it was altered out of malice before the disk was finalized?"

"Or it's nothing to do with the disk." Surge shrugged. "Let me have a look over her before we jump to any conclusions. Don't touch that!"

Anchor's paw hovered over a large gun and he retracted it slowly to his side.

"I was just lookin'," he muttered.

"Look with your eyes." Surge took a deep breath and ran a paw over her face. "Seriously, if that misfires, the entire building is gonna come down around our ears."

Anchor took a step back from the gun, then rejoined Macro's side.

Surge sighed and shook her head, moving over to the bedside unit. Macro watched her like a hawk as she looked over DL. Then she opened a drawer and pulled out a long, black cable.

"It must be so strange to have a jack lead adaptor in your head," she said, more to DL than to the space pirates. She then turned to Macro. "Are you wanting to stay and wait while I do this?"

"I was planning on it." Macro folded his arms and inclined his head on one side. "How long do you think this is gonna be?"

"Yeh," said Matrix. "'Cos I might go to the Lounge and play games."

Surge tutted and attached the cable to her computer. "Abandoning your captain? Not exactly a loyal little bee, are you?"

"I'm used to it." Macro pulled up a chair beside the coffee table.

"If I have time, I'm taking advantage of it," Matrix protested.

"It could be a while," said Surge. "I'm going to treat what's happened to her as a computer crash and leave my tablet running a full diagnostic. You might want to help yourselves to drinks."

"I'm on it." Anchor marched over to the refrigerator and tugged it open. "Woo. Berry juice. Not a bad selection. Someone likes their vitamins."

Surge rolled her eyes.

"I'm guessin' Macro's on the pecha juice," said Anchor. "Can I get you anything, Surge?"

"Pecha for me, too, please," said Surge without looking up.

Matrix buzzed over to Anchor and helped him pour out five glasses. Anchor sat opposite Macro with a sickly green juice that made Macro's nose crinkle.

Matrix raised his glass and nodded. "I'll just finish this and be out of your fur. You know where to find me."

Surge said nothing. Too focused on her task, or plain ignorance. Macro couldn't decide.

He sipped his drink, keeping one eye on the zigzagoon. His heart was hammering as his mind ran through every single worse-case scenario that resulted in DL never waking up. Trapped in an eternal sleep.

A loud scream came through the window, causing Macro to drop his glass. Anchor let his drop to the table, splashing the worn wood with bitter juice. All eyes went to the window, and Matrix shot towards it like a yellow dart.

A cacophony of voices melded in the street below. Shouts, cries, screams.

"It looks like a riot or something," said Matrix.

Macro pushed himself to his feet and ran to join the ribombee. Anchor and Surge appeared on either side and Matrix opened the window, allowing them all to lean out to get a clearer view.

It wasn't a riot.

Pokemon were gathering weapons or belongings and making a beeline for the docks.

"Think our friend showed up?" Anchor asked.

"Looks like it." Macro pushed back from the window and turned towards the door. "Come on, crew. We're gonna head it off."

"Where are you going?" Surge demanded. "What 'friend'?"

Macro stopped by the door and looked back over his shoulder. "There's a monster on the loose. Probably some dimensional beast Socket's warped plan has let loose. It was heading this way."

"And you were going to tell me all this when?"

Anchor spread his paws and looked from the zigzagoon to Macro. "You didn't warn her? You warned Worm."

Macro waved his arm at DL. "Excuse me if it kinda slipped my mind!"

"How could it slip your mind?" Matrix asked. "It wrecked our cargo hold."

More cries came from the street, distressed and frightened mixed with angry and commanding.

Macro gave himself a mental shake and threw the door open.

"Look, I'll explain later," he said quickly. "But right now, I wanna help destroy that thing. It's our fault we let it go in the first place. Look after DL."

He darted from the door with Anchor and Matrix on his tail.

"Just don't ask me to shoot it this time," said the ribombee.

"Macro! Wait!" Surge's voice faded out as the space pirates vanished into the elevator.

…

Pulse City was in an uproar. The streets heaved with pokemon of varying size and species. Some towered over Macro, stepping over his head and making him feel oddly vulnerable. Space pirates and residents stampeded back and forth, but most of them were heading towards the docks.

From the crowds and sirens, Macro guessed the docks was where the beast had been spotted. All the ships were crowded out, and pokemon shoved their way through to reach their respective ships. Some were pulling out, turning tail and heading into the vastness of System Sky.

Above them, the familiar shape of the strange jellyfish creature zoomed in on the horizon. So it hadn't reached them yet… Macro felt a flood of relief.

"Get to the ship," he told his crew. "We'll head it off and fire."

"So we're hunting strange, ominous creatures," said Anchor. "Gotcha."

Macro paused as he looked over the sea of scrambling bodies. "We just need to work our way through. I can dart between legs while Matrix can fly overhead. But you-"

"Nah, we're stickin' together," said Anchor. "I ain't losing you - or time - in all that."

The granbull scooped up Macro under one arm and barged through the crowd. The mawile waved his arms and shouted in protest, but was silenced by sparks flying from Anchor's flaming fangs. Pokemon darted out of the way as heat singed their fur, and they shot the space pirates looks of venom.

Macro raised his paws over his head, shielding himself from bumps and scrapes as Anchor powered his way through hard, scaly and thorny bodies. He didn't open his eyes until Anchor set him back down beside his ship.

"Made it," said the granbull. He ushered Macro onto the stairs. "What do you plan to do with the creature when we've shot it?"

"Well I don't plan on catching it again, that's for certain," said Macro. "I guess we just let it fall."

"But there's land beneath us," said Anchor. "What if it falls on someone, or crushes a building?"

"That's for System Ground to deal with." Macro fell into his seat and gestured to his crew. "Let's get this ship in the air and start firin'."

Anchor grumbled under his breath as the schooling wishiwashi fired to life. Wildcard Gamma pulled out of the docks and, unlike many of the other ships, turned towards the alien creature. Macro caught a glimpse of confused and angry faces staring up at them from the crowd below.

As they moved along the outer dome of Pulse City, the crowd thinned out. Larger space pirates herded the frightened mass towards the ships while the bolder of the group worked together to defend against the alien. Gathered on the outermost edge of the dome, space pirates of all sizes gathered, decked out in thermal suits and helmets. Frost clung to the light fabric and their breath

misted over the surface of the perspex glass. Smaller pokemon aimed their lasers, waiting for the monster to draw close enough, while a massive aggron stood with a missile launcher resting on his plated shoulder.

The city turrets aimed towards the creature, lying dormant as the pokemon manning them waited to fire.

"Hope we don't get caught up in all that onslaught," Anchor muttered.

"Then make sure to dodge it," said Macro. "Hopefully they'll appreciate a helping paw."

Matrix eyed the small army and wound his antenna in his paw. "Seems a bit overkill."

"If that thing's been destroying cities, I worry this might not be enough," said Macro. "Just concentrate all our fire power on that… jellyfish thing."

Anchor brought Wildcard Gamma to a stop, turning to face the alien head on. The strange creature didn't appear remotely phased. It kept 'swimming' towards them at the speed of knot, its long tentacles pulsing back and forth.

"Should we shoot now, Cap'n?" Anchor asked.

"Wait a minute," said Macro. "Wait for it to get a bit closer. We don't want to risk missing and agitating it."

"If I were to hazard a guess," said Matrix, "I'd say it's already pretty agitated."

"Still," said Macro. "Give it a little time, then we can get a nice good shot in."

No sooner had the words left his mouth, a narrow laser beam shot past the ship towards the creature, glancing off its head. The jellyfish swerved to the side, bringing its tentacles up to lash out at its

invisible foe. Then it turned towards the onslaught and darted towards them with alarming speed.

The entire small army went into an uproar, firing bullets, missiles and lasers right at the creature. It ducked and swerved, dodging the majority of them while the remainder hit its billowing tentacles and head frill.

"What are they doing?!" Macro roared.

"Guess your message didn't reach the turrets." Matrix rolled his eyes.

"I didn't send them a message!" Macro bit back.

"Exactly." Matrix turned back to his navigation system, silently winding his antenna in one paw.

The ship shook, lurching forwards and sending Macro sprawling onto the dashboard. A torrent of narrow lasers skimmed past the window, driving the creature to the right of Wildcard Gamma. Macro pushed himself back up, catching Anchor's concerned glance. The mawile swiftly buckled himself into his seat and sighed, shaking his head slowly.

"We're gonna go down in flames." He groaned and ran a paw down his face. "Just fire."

"Roger." Anchor's paws flew over a series of buttons on the dashboard, then he began to steer the ship forwards.

The familiar sound of the smaller wishiwashi snapping into place filled the cockpit, followed by a deep whir as they spun around the barrel of the ship. Bubbles flew out in a stream, exploding before they could reach their target. The impact blew the creature back and it floated on the spot, its eyeless face peering out at the bubble bombs as though it was reconsidering its actions.

"I don't think it likes it," said Matrix.

"Of course it doesn't," said Anchor. "They're bombs."

"Water type bombs," Matrix added.

"He's got a point," Macro told Anchor. "Get closer! Pepper that thing with them!"

Anchor silently drew the ship closer to the alien. Macro craned his neck around to try and get a view of the army. Their weapons flashed by the windows, skimming Wildcard Gamma's hull. But Macro's eye was drawn in by a flood of colourful ships pouring towards them from the docks. The lead ship was a gorebyss, followed by a magikarp and two basculin.

A grin spread across Macro's face. Back up. The more fire power aimed at that monster, the faster it would fall.

He turned back to the battle, just as another stream of bubble bombs flew from the ship's turrets. The strange creature doubled back then raised its tentacles. Hundreds of glowing rocks shot from it, striking the bombs before they could hit. They exploded on impact, drawing closer to Wildcard Gamma and creating a shock wave. The ship lurched backwards, right into the line of fire from the turrets.

Macro's seatbelt jabbed into his ribs as he jolted forwards in his seat.

"Oi!" He called over his shoulder, not that he could even see the pokemon manning the turret. "Watch where you're firin'!"

"That attack was power gem," said Matrix. "That creature is using the same attacks pokemon know."

Macro met the ribombee's eyes and he glanced away nervously, winding his antenna around in his paw so tightly Macro feared he might tug it off.

"You telling me that thing's a pokemon?" Macro asked.

Matrix shrugged and glanced out of the window. The strange creature was heading straight for them.

"Send out another bubble beam!" Macro told Anchor. "Even if it doesn't hit, it'll delay it getting to us. Then we can think up another plan."

Anchor gave a noncommittal grunt and the ship's turrets fired into action once more, spraying the beast with exploding bubbles. It reared back to counter attack, but the bubbles lit up with a blue light as a stream of ice flowed through them, hitting the creature head on. The gorebyss ship pulled up beside them, the long fin on its head glowing with a soft, silver-blue light. Once the attack ended, it faded out and a soft bubble surrounded the entire ship.

Fire then shield. One of those lasers that needed a bit of recharge time.

Macro turned back to the alien. It was still reeling from the laser attack. Frost clung to its head and right tentacles, and it flailed as it tried to dodge the slower bubble bombs as they exploded around it. Loud tinkling flew from an unseen mouth as it thrashed in the air, desperate to avoid the onslaught.

"I have an idea," said Anchor. "I'm gonna get behind it."

"What for?" Macro asked, aghast.

"I'm gonna herd it towards the army," Anchor replied. "Get it close enough that they can hit it with their weapons. Put it completely in the line of fire and see if it can handle all of that. If it works, it'll go down like a sack of rocks."

Before Macro could reply, Wildcard Gamma ducked to the side, drawing away from the gorebyss. The elegant ship took their previous spot and the fin atop its head began to glow softly, almost pulsing as it charged up its next aurora beam imitation.

The basculin ships seemed to have the same idea Anchor had. They came at the monster from the opposite side, the frowning faces of their ships screaming business. If they weren't going to herd it towards the army, Macro assumed they meant to tackle it head on. He doubted it, however. Ships that relied on physical, brute strength often didn't survive very long in the sky.

Wildcard Gamma drew closer to the creature's left, then fired another stream of bullets. It moved away from them, rather than towards the small army, putting it in striking distance of the basculin. The creature swung around in an arc, throwing glowing rocks straight at Wildcard Gamma. Several hit the bombs, while those that didn't struck the hull and window. Macro flinched back from the windscreen, raising his paws to shield his head. When he looked up, he was greeted by a spider web of cracks and a pitiful groan left his mouth. He'd have to deal with that later.

His eyes went back to the basculin ships. They were much closer to the beast now, and the furthest one opened its cargo hatch mouth wide. It sent out a stream of steaming water, all the while still moving towards it. The creature screeched as it skimmed its tentacles. A glancing hit, designed to drive it away from them. The other basculin opened its mouth in the same manner, but rather than fire a weapon, it instead snapped it shut with a speed that caused Macro to flinch.

Another screech came from the creature and it flailed, striking the ship with its tentacles. A stream of purple flowed from its wounded limb, raining down onto System Ground. The basculin span behind the creature, one of it tentacles clasped in the tightly closed jaws of its cargo hold like a tiny noodle.

"Alright," said Anchor. "Looks like it's workin'."

But the creature held on with one tentacle, hanging from the basculin ship's exit hatch. It pulled itself up as the ship slowed down, spreading out on top of it like a tiny hat.

Macro raised an eyebrow. What was the creature up to?

The basculin ship span on the spot, opening its jaws wide. It snapped them closed over the side of the other basculin, tearing a huge hole in the hull. The other ship retaliated with steaming water, missing its sudden foe and instead striking Wildcard Gamma on the nose.

"Oi!" Macro waved his paw. "What are you attacking each other for, you fools! Hit the creature!"

"I think it's taken over the ship," said Matrix.

The hostile basculin turned on the spot towards Wildcard Gamma, letting the friendly ship plummet towards the ground below. Macro's heart sank as he watched the ship vanish through the clouds. His eyes went back to their former ally. Through the basculin eye windows he caught sight of the pilot. An emolga, desperately trying to bring the ship under its control.

Matrix was right. The creature was controlling it somehow.

Its tinkly voice filled the air, and the ship opened its jaws. A stream of boiling water flew at Wildcard Gamma.

Anchor threw his weight against the steering stick and the ship lurched to the side, narrowly avoiding the attack. Steaming water skimmed the hull of the ship, followed by a stomach-churning crack. There went one of the turrets…

The gorebyss sent forth an ice attack, hitting the creature in the head. It flailed, smashing the head of the basculin and spraying purple acid over its head and windows. The corrosive liquid burned through the metal and the emolga went into a panic, rushing away from the ship's controls.

Wildcard Gamma launched another stream of bubbles, catching the creature's limbs and driving it from the basculin ship. It finally released it, letting the abandoned ship plummet through the clouds.

A small yellow and black shape leapt from it, followed by two other small pokemon. Their parachutes kicked in, drowning out their small bodies as they followed their ship towards System Ground.

"All right. New plan." Macro ran a paw over his face. "Don't let that creature touch my ship."

"Gotcha." Anchor fired up the turrets once more.

Bubbles flew at the creature before it could gather itself. It backed away from Wildcard Gamma, dodging some of the bombs but not quite getting out of the way of the attack. It was blown backwards towards Pulse City. The gorebyss ship closed in behind it, hitting it with another ice laser. The ice and bombs combined sent the creature like a ping pong ball right towards the army.

The waiting troop caught on, sending a torrent of weapon fire right into its bulbous head. Missiles, bullets and lasers struck home, blowing it backwards towards the waiting ships. Anchor didn't hang around, and neither did the gorebyss. All attacks concentrated on the creature, drowning out its cries. Then the attacks lessened off, and the tentacled monstrosity dropped like a stunned ducklett towards the world below.

"We did it." Anchor sat back in his seat and wiped a paw across his brow. "Wow. It took an army to stop that thing. What was it made of?"

Macro said nothing. He watched the creature vanish into the blackness, his claws digging into the dashboard. Anchor's words were spinning around his head, breaking him into a cold sweat. They'd saved Pulse City, but what city was below them exactly?

Never mind the creature alone falling on top of a city. It had followed two fallen ships. A sudden rain of shrapnel, bringing a brutal end to another city.

Save one, lose another. He hoped desperately that was the only monstrosity to come from Socket's toying with time and space.

Chapter 41

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter 41

BackDoor flew with his arms tucked behind his head, his eyes closed as he was deep in thought. TimeSkip's flying was far from silent. His wings filled the air with a deep, droning buzz which was really beginning to grate on BackDoor. He snapped one eye open, fixing the odd onion-like android with a glare.

"Can't you fly more quietly?" he growled.

TimeSkip said nothing, fixing its blank eyes on the vastness behind him.

BackDoor turned his head to look over his shoulder, then looked back at the celebi.

"There's nothing there," he said. "Have you picked up another time pocket?"

Silence.

BackDoor narrowed his eyes and clenched his teeth together. "All right, this has gone on long enough. I'm bored. Say something!"

The celebi stared blankly ahead, the only sound coming from its rapid wing beats.

BackDoor glided towards it, fixing his eyes on the celebi's emotionless bug-like, glassy ones.

"Hmm… not like you to disobey. I think you might have a problem," he said. "Run a full diagnostics."

The celebi fluttered before him, still not looking at him.

BackDoor let out a sigh and muttered under his breath. "I have to do everything, don't I?"

He reached behind TimeSkip and, clutching him under one arm, flicked the power switch with his free paw. He counted silently to ten then switched it back on again. The celebi flared to life, lifting its heavy head to look right at him.

"Feeling better?" BackDoor asked. "Gonna speak to me now?"

A spray of binary flew through the hoopa's head and he shook it sharply, raising a paw to silence the celebi.

"I don't want your life story," he said. "Run a full diagnostics then tell me what was wrong in a nutshell. 'Kay?"

The celebi fell silent and its glassy eyes went even more blank as its internal computer searched through every inch of its system.

BackDoor leant back on his arms and yawned. Given the celebi android's short life, it shouldn't take too long to search through its data banks.

He peered over his shoulder at the emptiness of System Sky. They were far away from any of the floating cities. Supposedly the perfect spot to search through time and space for a new System. TimeSkip hadn't found a single suitable time pocket. They'd all been dangerously prehistoric or a mere hundred or so years ago. Any other worlds had been either empty or toxic. Searching for somewhere clean for Socket and her select elite to retreat into had got off to a bad start, and TimeSkip's silence for the last… half a day?… had likely cost them some progress. He looked back over the celebi's shoulder and sighed.

"Don't think I can be bothered going all the way back to see what you missed," he muttered.

Binary filled his head and he snapped back to reality.

'Diagnostics complete. Ready to relay information.'

"Shoot."

'Detected and repaired damaged communication components,' said TimeSkip. 'Damage caused by passing virus on route to Download Database. Successfully quarantined all traces and irreparable data.'

BackDoor raised an eyebrow. "Passing virus? When did you pick up a virus?"

'Damage dates back to around six thirty AM.'

"Huh." BackDoor scratched his head. "That's about the time I got a headache. If it's been sent to Download Database, I'm gonna guess Yobi's used my network as a means to transfer it, and damaged you in the process. Maybe I should run a diagnostics on myself?"

A million voices filled his head at once and he clasped both paws over his horns. With a groan, he filtered them out to make some level of sense.

'P0ck3t f0uNd. L0c4Ti0N UNkN0wN. ReL4yiNG c0-0rDiN4T3ssssszz.'

He looked back up at TimeSkip as a stream of numbers registered in his mind. "Guess a diagnostics will have to wait." A large grin spread across his face. "Sounds like Zero Day have found another world."

'Affirmative.'

"I say we go play with them for a little bit, huh?"

The two androids doubled back then zipped towards the porygon-Z fleet's co-ordinates.

…

Macro gave a quick glance over his ship. Blue paint peeled back from the hull, and the metal was melted away in parts. A huge hole graced where one of the turrets had been positioned, revealing the intricate wiring and water pipes. Anchor had confirmed that one of the small wishiwashi had been torn clean away from the turret belt. There was no retrieving that. They'd have to have another one built, or repair the damage and make do with a missing turret. The damage this time was immense compared to previous damage. His heart sank at the sight of it and he felt himself break out into a cold sweat.

"I'll deal with this." Anchor dropped a heavy paw onto Macro's shoulder. "You go check on DL."

"You sure you can fix this?" Macro gestured to the wishiwashi's exposed innards.

"I can sure give it a shot," said Anchor. "I helped build the thing, after all. Pretty sure we can get the bits and pieces we need from Pulse City, if you're fine shelling out for it. Worst case scenario, I'll have to take a pod to the outskirts to gather scraps, and you'll be stuck in Pulse City for a couple of nights."

Macro scratched his ear and brought his bank balance up on his optical display. Just over thirty thousand credits. Thankfully the winnings he'd received from their game of farkle had cushioned it out nicely. Still… space pirates could charge a pretty credit for scrap materials.

"Have a hunt around." He closed his display and gave Anchor a wave as he turned away. "You know where to find me."

Macro marched down the street with Matrix buzzing at his head level. He cast the ribombee a sideways glance then tucked his paws behind his head.

"Part of me can't believe we actually took down that thing," he said. "If it weren't for the damage to my ship, I'd think I'd dreamt it."

Matrix shrugged and pulled out his small computer. "At least it's not posing a threat any more."

Macro snorted. "I dread to think what the pokemon living in the city below us are thinking right now. Because that wreckage will have obliterated it."

"It's Baud City," said Matrix as he thumbed his computer screen. "The damage is immense, and there's been over a hundred casualties. Twenty are confirmed dead."

Macro grit his teeth together and flinched. More accidental lives he could add to his list.

"But the damage is concentrated to the business district and coast line," Matrix explained. "The apartment blocks on its outskirts are still intact. The antenna connecting it to System's grid has received some level of damage, giving it a power outage for fifteen minutes. But that's back online now, so I wouldn't worry. The city itself is still intact. Somewhat."

Matrix popped his computer away, not a single look of remorse on his tiny face. Of course, that wasn't to say he didn't care. He was about as easy to read as a blank notebook.

"I'm gonna get to Moonlight Lounge," the ribombee explained. "I really wanna sink myself into Assassin Strike for a while."

Macro let out a small sigh and glanced away from him. "To be honest, I was hoping you'd come with me to Surge's apartment."

"What for?"

"I dunno. I… just don't really wanna be alone with her."

Matrix rubbed beneath his goggles and looked up at one of the passing billboards. "All right. I'll come with you for a few minutes."

"Make it thirty minutes and I'll buy you dinner."

"What?" Matrix raised an eyebrow. "You're being weird today."

"I just almost destroyed a city trying to save this one." Macro stopped in the middle of the street and spread his arms wide. "Pokemon have died because I tried to stop that creature potentially destroying Pulse City. Forgive me if I seem a little off right now!"

"Okay." Matrix stared at him until he started walking again. "But I dunno what almost destroying a city has to do with Surge."

"She's pushy," Macro explained. "I'm worried if she goes too far I'll end up doing something I regret."

"Like what?"

"I dunno. Shoot her?"

Matrix chuckled and paused to look over at Moonlight Lounge. "So if she gets too pushy, I get a free dinner? Guess I'm game."

Macro said nothing as he pushed the buzzer to Surge's apartment. The zigzagoon's voice came out from the intercom no sooner he took his claw off the button.

"Who is it?"

"It's Macro. Let me in."

He thought he heard her tut before the buzzer rang and the door opened. He exchanged glances with Matrix then slipped inside, making a beeline for the elevator. The precarious contraption rattled its way up to her floor, opening its doors and revealing its trip-hazard of a step up onto the carpet.

Surge was waiting for them at her door, a small frown creasing her cream and brown face.

"I see you brought your cute bodyguard," she said.

"Eh?" Macro froze slightly and his jaw went slack.

"I heard you from the window, moron." Surge turned and marched back into her apartment, leaving the door wide open for the two space pirates.

Macro followed behind her and his eyes went straight to the bed in the corner of the small apartment. DL lay on her back beneath the blankets, a long cable stretching out from the back of her head. The other end of which was attached to Surge's computer tablet.

"How is she?" Macro asked.

Surge gestured for him to sit down and he pulled up a seat at the kitchen counter. Matrix landed atop it and sat with his long legs hanging over the edge. The zigzagoon didn't look up from her computer, feigning interest in the contents of the screen.

"I ran a full diagnostics," she explained. "Her mind is filled with damaged files, and it's great enough to render her unconscious. I'd actually call this some form of coma."

Macro felt his blood turn cold. He looked over at the pachirisu, seeming so small beneath the sheets. His heart ached. What had happened? A lump rose in his throat and he tore his eyes away, instead staring at his black paw as it contrasted with the nicotine-coloured kitchen counter.

"She has a fully functional anti-virus system installed," said Surge. "Which is sensible given the confidential information she's been installed with. The diagnostics found a lock on those confidential files, which blocks her from accessing them. With a bit of tweaking, I've manage to give her access to that again."

"I'm not bothered about that," Macro said through his teeth. "What's happened to her?"

"I'm getting to that," Surge growled. "I thought at first the lock might have done something. Like it had locked her out of her own consciousness. But it's not that. A bit more poking around revealed all the damaged files, most of which are memories tied with her self awareness and brain function. I believe those are contained on the second disk you installed. Her default could be likened to an android brain, only in data form and not physical in any way. My second suspicion was that they were competing and it had shut her down. It's not that either. What I did find is actually very interesting."

She turned in her seat to face Macro and showed him the computer screen. He couldn't make head nor tail of it, but Matrix leant forward on the kitchen counter to get a better look.

"Wow!" the ribombee gasped. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Depends what you think it is," said Surge. "It behaves in every way like a worm."

"A worm?" Macro looked up at her, meeting her eyes briefly before she looked back at her computer. "Are you saying DL has a virus?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Surge turned away from them again and pawed over the screen. "I had my doubts at first, but the anti virus she's been installed with can't detect it. It's as though it's been made specifically to override it. Automatic updates, even forced updates, won't give her any antibodies to fight this virus. I tried to get rid of it myself. I even tried transferring it to my own computer, but it won't budge. As such, I've had to quarantine it. To do that, I had to unlock her access to the Download Database and lock it away in there."

"Won't it destroy those files?" Macro asked.

Matrix glanced him out of the corner of his eye and wound his antenna in his paw. "Not if it's quarantined."

"Matrix is right," said Surge. "I've locked it away in one of the furthermost corners of that database. It's stuffed inside a redundant file and locked up. I don't know how it behaves, since I've not had enough time to study it. There's every chance it will eat its way free. But I've done my best. My only other option was to completely wipe her, Download Database and all. That would have meant wiping out all her memories, old and new. But part of me feels you wouldn't have wanted me to do that."

Surge cleared her throat and looked back up at the pachirisu.

Wiping all her memories, old and new… that would have meant she'd have no idea who Macro even was. Surge had avoided it. The thought left Macro feeling a little warm, yet worried at the same time. If that virus got free, the same thing could happen again. He bit his lip, fighting back the urge to ask her to just go ahead with it. Was he being selfish?

A heavy lump rose in his throat again and he turned in his seat so he was no longer looking at DL.

"There's an upside to this," said Surge. "Given I had to unlock Download Database, you now have complete access to it. If you want to fight back against it, DL is your weapon. You'll always be one step ahead."

Macro nibbled on his claw and gave Surge a sideways glance. "So what are you doing now?"

"Re-installing all her memories in hopes it will repair the damaged files," she said. "It's my home-run swing before I resort to wiping her completely and starting fresh. But I don't want to do that." She looked up at him over her shoulder briefly. "Could you imagine being stuck with all these mechanical parts in your head and having no idea why?"

"She currently doesn't have any idea why," said Macro.

"No. But with access to the Database she might be able to find out why she was created."

Macro's heart did a somersault. Were they really about to find out?

"I think I've worked out which disk is which," Surge explained. "I've not detected a virus on any of them."

"That's a relief," said Macro. "I was worried the recent disk had been tampered with."

"It definitely hasn't," she said. "I'm going to try and install the first two you did before we go for the most recent one."

Surge reached for one of the disks and slipped it into her computer. DL's eyes flew open and stared blankly at the ceiling. The antenna behind her ear flared to life, flickering as it received the information from the disk. Macro was on the edge of his seat, his heart pounding in his throat. He dared not breathe, watching as Surge removed the first disk for the second. Not a peep came from DL. It was unlike the first times they installed the disks. She'd been awake. This time… why wasn't she responding?

As the second disk uploaded its information, everything seemed to go by so slowly, but the clock on Surge's oven told him it had been merely ten minutes since they'd arrived and the first two disks had been re-installed.

When Surge removed the disk from her computer, the light behind DL's ear flickered and she stretched languidly, rubbing her paws across her eyes.

Macro leapt from his seat, balling his paws into fists. His heart was hammering in his chest. Had it worked? Did she have her recent memories?

She looked up at him and let her paw fall to her side as her chocolate eyes widened.

"Macro?" She looked around the room. "Where am I?"

His legs went weak. In his mind, he'd thrown his arms around her. But in reality he sank to the floor, clenching his paw so tightly his claws dug into his pads.

"Oh, DL…" He grit his teeth together and looked up at her so sharply she recoiled slightly under the duvet. "Don't you ever do that again!"

Tears welled up in his eyes and he screwed them shut, turning his face to the floor. He felt them break free and he whisked a paw over his face, letting them soak into his fur.

"What did I do?" DL asked quietly.

"You did nothing," said Surge. "Ignore him. He's a grump."

She reached behind her for the third and final disk.

"You're installing my memories again?" DL asked weakly.

"Yes." Surge looked back at her. "How are you feeling?"

"A little confused." DL blinked her huge chocolate eyes and stared at the far wall at the foot of the bed. "I don't know who you are, but I recognise Macro and Matrix. Also… I have some memories but it's as though I can't focus on them."

"That will be because of the virus. It's corrupted the files Macro recently installed into you." Surge popped the disk into her computer. "Brace yourself. If this works, they're about to become a lot clearer."

DL clutched the duvet in both paws and cowered back behind it. Then her eyes went blank as the third disk spewed its information into her brain.

Macro remained on his knees, gritting his teeth together so tightly it hurt. Part of him doubted it would work. The image of DL 'malfunctioning' was too crystal clear in his mind. He made a silent

promise to her. If this failed again, he'd drop this mission. He'd let her have peace, and start afresh without those wretched disks.

Her eyes refocused again and she let the duvet go slack. Surge reached across her and removed the jack lead, opening her mouth to speak. But before words could leave her mouth, DL let out a pained, terrified scream.

Macro leapt to his feet and his paw flew to his laser. But it relaxed beside it as DL slumped forward, tugging the duvet up to her face.

"I know now!" she wailed. "I know everything!"

Everything…

That was the disk she'd been terrified of.

Macro crept over to her and perched on the edge of the bed.

"She did this to me," DL choked out. "She's a monster!"

There was nothing he could say. He reached out and pulled her into him, letting her head rest against his chest. Her paw wound itself into the fur of his shoulder and she let out a long, shaky sob.

"I trusted her!" Her words were muffled into his scarf. "I trusted her and she took everything from me!"

He fastened his arms around her and ran a paw over her back. "Well she can't hurt you any more."

"No, but she wants me back." Her words were interspersed with sobs. It pained him. "If she gets me back… she'll use me like some machine…"

"She won't get you back," he said. "I promise that."

"You don't know what she's done! What's she's planning!" Her entire body shook with violent sobs and coughs. "She's insane. Absolutely

insane!"

…

No more than fifteen years old.

The young pachirisu sat at the back of the craft room, colouring in a recently drawn picture. The scene depicted was full of grass and berry orchards. Not that such scenes were prominent in System. She'd never been to System Sky. Never seen the orchards that grew in Cyan City.

Two years she'd spent in the orphanage, although her memory as to why was hazy. Her parents had died, that much she knew.

A small espurr shuffled over to her to grab a pencil box, his tiny paws barely reaching the edge of the table. She smiled down at him and plopped the pencil box gently into his outstretched paws.

"Thanks, Loop," he lisped before waddling over to the hatchling corner.

The pachirisu gave him a warm smile before returning to her drawing. She'd barely put pencil back to paper when the old door creaked open. She craned her neck around, her eyes falling on the lithe form of a furret. Behind her stood a tall, dark pokemon. Her body was covered in a frilly black fur, adorned with white ribbons. Loop's heart froze in her chest and her pencil clattered to the table, leaving a red scuff on the green grass of her orchard.

"This is her," said the furret. "Young Loop here has been with us for two years. None of her family are alive, so…"

"Such an odd place for an electric type," said Socket. "I thought she'd be in Botnet Orphanage. Not Meta City."

"Sadly they're full," said the furret. "After the accident-" her voice blurred, not coming into focus.

Loop placed both paws over her ears, cowering over the table. What did the mayor want with her? She could feel her icy eyes burning into the side of her head.

"I can offer her a home." The gothitelle's face melted into a warm smile. "I've been wanting a daughter."

Loop's young heart did a backflip. Was she actually getting out? And to live with System's mayor? Thoughts raced through her mind, not settling on one scenario. She'd made friends at the orphanage, but to have a normal life… go to a normal school…

"I'll have my PA deal with the paperwork," Socket told the furret.

"That's not… ordinarily…" The furret backed down from Socket's stare and nodded briskly. "That's fine. I know you're busy, and being the Mayor and all…"

Before she knew it, Loop found herself being bundled into a sleek, black limo. A tiny chingling looked back at her from the driver's seat, beaming through the bullet-proof glass separating him from the back seats. Driving was almost unnecessary. The orphanage was only a ten minute walk from the mansion.

The first thing to greet her were a pair of intimidating pidgeot guards. Their beady black eyes watched her every move as Socket led her up the small staircase to the large, ornamental doors.

"I'll show you to your room." The chingling flopped past her, his internal bell ringing with each small movement. "Socket's a busy 'mon."

"That won't be necessary," said Socket. "I'll show my new daughter to her chambers."

"Seriously?" The chingling looked a little taken aback. "I don't get this kind of treatment."

"You don't need it. Now get back to work." Socket stared at the back of the chingling, watching until he vanished around a corner. She then turned back to Loop and waved a paw for her to climb the stairs. "Come with me. It's just up on the second floor."

The plush carpet cushioned her feet as she clambered up each luxurious step. Two flights and she found herself surrounded by closed doors. Socket led her a little way down the corridor and paused beside one of the identical doors, throwing it open.

Loop's breath was taken away. The room was just as ornamental as the rest of the mansion. A huge bed perched at one side, surrounded by four posts. The bed had its own curtains to match the ones over the window. Blue and white, trailing down to the smooth, polished wooden floor. She could almost see her reflection in the wood as she stepped inside. Her first instinct was to examine the wooden desk by the window, pulling out the little drawer.

"There's a pencil set in here," she said.

"Of course," said Socket. "You like drawing, don't you? I don't want to deprive you of that."

She looked back at the gothitelle, all previous anxieties washed away. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'll leave you to settle in." Socket stepped back from the door and began to pull it closed. "Oh. One more thing. Dinner is at seven. I'll send Tweak to get you."

"Of course. I look forward to it." Loop smiled as she watched Socket vanish behind the closed door.

Almost three years went by, the first of which was pure bliss. Loop attended school and was picked up promptly each day by Tweak. Socket involved her in her work on Saturdays, showing her the ropes of being a mayor. The promise was one day Loop would take over, and she took it very seriously.

Drawing was soon replaced by studying the laws of System until they were emblazoned in her mind. Air cleanliness, water dwellers, space pirates, prison sentences, crimes… her mind span. Once she'd finished school, she went straight into law.

When she came home during her first break from Binary College, she couldn't wait to relax in her own room. Being the Mayor's daughter had been met with hostility and sleepless nights. She made her way to Socket's office and knocked softly.

"Come in." The reply felt cold. Unwelcoming.

She pushed the door open and shot one of her beaming smiles to the gothitelle. "It's me. I'm back-"

"Loop, finally." Socket leant back in her seat and waved her paw towards a huge holoscreen display. "Meet my genius in science, Yobi."

Loop stepped into the room, looking warily up at the screen. The chubby face of a sparksurfer raichu peered curiously down at her.

"So this is the young pachirisu I'll be working with?" he asked.

"Of course," said Socket. "I expect good work from the both of you."

Loop turned her head to look at Socket and her paws went to her chest. "Science? I thought I was pursuing law."

Socket waved a paw. "Forget that. I need you to team up with Yobi. I have huge plans for System, and they don't include law. Not at this early stage."

"But-"

"No buts. I've already handed your notice into Binary College. You won't be going back."

Loop's heart sank. Part of her thought she'd be happy to see the back of Binary College. But no longer pursuing law… something she'd poured two years into…

Little did she know her new direction of science was the start of a nightmare.

Yobi's lab was filled with all kinds of niknaks, from screws and bolts to robotic limbs. It was like a cybernetic morgue. He talked her through mechanics and computer coding, none of which made sense. What did stand out to her the most were the technicalities of dimensional travel. History books were thrown at her. Well… he called them history. To her, it was all mythology. Books on pokemon legends such as dialga and palkia, pokemon believed to control time and space. Celebi, hoopa… they came next. Glowing gateways into different worlds all made little sense to her.

She voiced her concerns many times to Socket over dinner - it was becoming the only time they ever spoke - but the Mayor merely waved it off and changed the subject.

So Yobi's lessons went on.

Why he was forcing this stuff into her head, she had no idea. She was beginning to wonder if Socket had hired a lunatic.

Until one morning.

Violent paws shook her awake and her eyes flew open. It was still dark, but the gothitelle's blue eyes were glowing fiercely. She found herself lifted to her feet in a bubble of purple energy.

Paralyzed.

"What are you doing?!" Loop screamed. "Put me down!"

"Not yet. You're a part of this." Socket lugged her down the hallway, leaving the pachirisu to thrash inside her bubble prison. "Besides. If I

told you where we were going, you wouldn't obey."

Tossed into a car and driven to the other end of Meta City. Her shouts fell on deaf ears as Tweak steered them through the busy streets. Once again, she was lifted into the air and lugged after the Mayor, to be dropped unceremoniously onto Yobi's laboratory floor.

The room was dimly lit, casting the lab in shadows reminiscent of a nightmare. Murky light reflected off a glistening metal trolley behind the raichu, lighting up sharp scalpel blades and needles.

"It's time," said Socket. "Make it quick."

Yobi stuttered and rubbed his paws together, looking from Loop to Socket and back.

"I still don't understand," he said. "Isn't she your daughter?"

"Yes." Socket folded her arms. "I've told you repeatedly - that's how it's meant to look. Pokemon have seen me with her, almost every day. I think it's safe to say we've eluded their suspicions."

Yobi rubbed the back of his ears and stared down at the trembling pachirisu. "If you're sure there's no one else-"

"There's always you." Socket's voice was laced with ice, freezing Yobi to the spot.

"No, no. I can work with her," he stuttered.

"Good. Now get that database uploaded into her and let's get on with our job."

"But… it's a delicate procedure," he said. "I've not got all the kinks worked out yet. It could spell disaster."

"You've been working on this for a year," Socket spat. "Are you telling me you can't download an entire database into a brain?"

"Oh, I can… I've got the device made and everything. But-"

"But what?"

Loop's heart was almost hammering its way out of her chest. She scurried backwards across the dusty floor, only to be stopped by another psychic bubble. Tweak's grinning face stared back at her from the other side and he swung his whole body around, sending her back to the Mayor's waiting feet.

"Well, the thing is…" Yobi wrung his paws together. "She's a bit of a… how do I put this… a strong personality. Do you really want all this confidential information uploaded into someone who could turn rebellious?"

Socket scratched her chin. "You've mentioned this to me before. Several times, in fact. My answer remains the same. You can upload information, so why not remove it, too?"

"And I told you that's murder! You're removing her very essence! You're the Mayor, you can't just take someone's life away."

"What?!" Loop tried to climb to her feet, but it was like moving in a vat of glue.

"Be quiet!" Socket waved a paw, silencing Loop's voice in her throat. Then she turned back to Yobi. "She'd still be alive."

"Look. See it this way." Yobi spread his paws. "What makes a pokemon is their personality. Without their memories and personality, they're just… vegetables. You're asking me to turn her into a vegetable. At least try to think up a legal loophole. How about I… I dunno… try to save all her essence to a disk? At least then, she's still got it. It's just… downloaded elsewhere."

"Fine. Download everything, save it, then upload Download Database. I want her wired to the BackDoor network before dawn tomorrow. Then we can get looking for a new world."

New world? Loop's heart was hammering inside her chest. All that information. Hoopa, celebi, palkia and dialga… it hadn't been for nothing.

Socket strolled from the room with Tweak in tow. As the door closed behind her, Loop was released from her bubble. She stared up at Yobi, trembling from ear to toe.

"Sorry." He trapped her in another bubble and reached behind him towards the metal trolley. "I promise you won't feel a thing."

…

DL's sobs lessened off, but the fur over her cheeks glistened with tears.

That awful nightmare of a story filled Macro's mind with vivid, horrific images he wished to lock away in a tiny box in the corner of his mind. Who would do that? Trick a child into a lie of security, just to use them as a tool in a warped, vindictive plan?

DL's trembling breath tickled the fur on Macro's chest, and as she shifted against him the scent of lavender filled his nose. It left him feeling physically weak, but a fire ignited deep within him. His grip slackened and he let his claws trail over her fur as he fixed the headboard with a piercing, violet leer.

"She'll have to kill me before she can ever lay her paws on you again." The words left his mouth before he'd even had time to process them.

His paw faltered over her spine, but he didn't take his eyes off the headboard. Her sobs had become a snuffle and she was stock still, her claws wound into the fabric of his scarf. He pulled away from her but she didn't relinquish his scarf. She clutched it in her paws, her wide, glossy chocolate eyes flying around the room and settling on anything but him. They trailed over the wall, Matrix, Surge…

Surge cleared her throat and rose to her feet to head towards the kitchen. Macro looked from the zigzagoon's tatty tail to DL's terrified eyes. His heart clenched in his chest and he let himself fall onto his bottom on the floor as he wiped his face dry.

"I think we need to give… Loop, I guess?… time to come to terms with things," said Surge.

"Don't call me that," DL hissed. "Don't you ever call me that."

"But it's your name, isn't it?" Matrix wound his antenna in his paw thoughtfully.

DL gave her head a violent shake. "No. No, it's not! The last pokemon to ever call me that was her. I don't want anything to do with her. That name died that night."

"She's right." Macro stared down at his paws as he straightened out his scarf. "Nothing wrong with having two names. I do it."

"Yes, but your alias is to throw other pokemon off your scent," said Surge. "If someone were to find a dead mawile, your chip would say 'Macro', am I right?"

He snorted and waved the zigzagoon off. "Anyway. Let DL use whatever name she wants. I don't blame her for wanting nothing to do with Socket. That mad Mayor has just given me another reason to see her fall."

"What's all this about looking for a new world?" Matrix asked.

DL trembled and fixed her gaze on the wall. "I'll tell you later. I'm still coming to terms with it. Some things are blurrier than others. Like… I don't have any memories prior to being in that orphanage. None at all. No idea what even happened to my family. But the details concerning her plan… I'm sure they're in the database, but my own memories of them are hazy. Like I've repressed them."

"You probably have," said Surge. "Give it time."

DL nodded and leant back against the wall.

"Anyway," said Surge. "Who wants tea? You've not told me about your fight with that monster yet, Macro. I could hear the commotion all the way out here."

"What monster?" DL's voice wavered and she looked over at the mawile.

"I don't even know," said Macro. "It was like some weird jellyfish thing. But it's gone now. We took care of it." He paused and scratched his scar. "Anchor's currently repairing the damages."

Surge chuckled. "Did it wreck your ship?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"Monsters… So much has happened. I feel like I'm missing something." DL shook her head then looked over at Surge. "I'm still unsure who you are. Is this your apartment?"

"Yes, but I'm sure Macro can explain everything," said Surge. "I'm just a helpful mercenary who's expecting a fat paycheck after this."

"A paycheck for what?"

Surge wiped her hands on a tea towel and turned back to DL. "You had a virus afflicting your memories. I dealt with it, and I don't work for free."

"In that case, if we're all done here," said Matrix, "I'm gonna go play Assassin Strike for a bit."

"Hey, you promised me thirty minutes!" Macro barked.

"Well, if Surge's paycheck is as fat as she hopes it will be, I doubt you'll be buying me lunch." Matrix buzzed to the door and paused to

wave over his shoulder. "Glad to see you up and about, DL. Buhbye!"

The door slammed shut behind him, shattering Macro's confidence. He cleared his throat and pushed himself to his feet.

"Well." He climbed back into his seat at the counter. "Guess I'd better explain everything, then?"

DL shook her head. "No need. I actually think I could use a walk."

She clambered to her feet, her legs trembling as she struggled her way towards the door.

"Wait." Macro lifted a paw to stop her. "Don't go alone. I'll come with you."

"No…" She fixed one eye on him over her shoulder. "I don't want to be a burden."

Her words stabbed him through the heart. He flinched and looked away from her. "You're not a burden. Just wait by the elevator, and I'll be with you as soon as I've paid Surge."

DL pursed her lips together and slipped through the door, letting it close softly behind her.

Macro slid from his seat and reached into his pocket. "I have some cash, if-"

Surge grabbed him roughly by the shoulder and backed him into the wall. He looked up with a start, opening his mouth to speak, but his words were silenced as she brushed her lips against his. He jerked his head back, but all that came from his throat was a feeble choke as something cold pressed against his chest. He glanced down, and his eyes widened slowly as he spotted the glowing rim of a laser right above his heart.

Red.

Red for fire.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 42

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter 42

Macro's breath froze in his throat. His entire mouth had turned dry, and his paws felt like useless, clammy lumps stuck to the end of wooden limbs. He couldn't move.

Sandwiched between the solid wall and the hostile nozzle of a laser. Its rim lit up, loaded. He could already feel the heat from its coil as it readied itself to fire.

That was it. No way out, nowhere to run. As soon as she pulled that trigger, he'd be dead. There was no way he was living a blast of fire at such close proximity. He wasn't fast enough to counter it. He daren't even move. One twitch and she'd fire.

That would be the end of him. He hadn't stopped Socket. He hadn't got Switch back to his own time line. He hadn't fulfilled his promise to DL. He hadn't even apologized to her, and at that moment he wanted to do that more than ever.

The laser jerked, jabbing into his ribs, and Surge let out a strangled choke. His attention snapped from the laser to her face, but she wasn't looking at him. Her lips curled back into a grimace, and her eyes were screwed tightly shut. The one ear he could see lay parallel to her skull, reminiscent of a scorned hatchling. Her paw trembled violently and she let out another choke, letting the laser clatter to the floor.

"I can't do it!" She flopped into him and he raised his paws to catch her.

That breath finally left his throat, and he fixed the far wall with wide, violet eyes. He gave himself a mental shake and dragged his focus

back to Surge. The zigzagoon sobbed into his scarf and wrapped her paw over his shoulder, her claws digging into his flesh. It felt a whole lot more intimidating than it should have done, given the circumstances.

He took a steadying breath and turned her towards the bed, giving her a gentle shove until she was seated. Then he smoothed his scarf down and gave the laser a hefty kick. It skittered across the floor and vanished beneath her dressing table.

"Gonna tell me what that was about?" he growled.

She didn't look up at him, just stared down at her paws. He caught a lone tear which vanished into her brown fur.

"That job I took?" Her breath rattled as she wiped a paw across her eyes. "I've been hired to kill you."

"Let me guess." Macro folded his arms and leant his weight on one leg. "Socket hired you?"

She nodded weakly.

"And that's why you've been following me, ain't it?" He let out a bitter laugh and shook his head. "It all makes so much sense now. Our 'stalker' vanished once we removed DL's tracking chip. Threw you off the scent, huh? Bet you couldn't wait to get me cornered behind these walls."

"It's not like that!" she snapped. "I've spared your life three times now!"

"Oh. Thanks." He flashed a canine and glanced over at the window. "Gonna give me a chance to run before you give chase again? Never should have trusted a mercenary."

"Shut up."

"So. Should I just up and leave now? Get a head start?" He pointed at the door, then his eyes widened slightly and he wiped a paw across his mouth. "I wouldn't be surprised if that sneaky little kiss of yours were an attempt to poison me."

"I'm not a poison type." She fixed her pale brown eyes on his, fierce yet still wet with tears.

"It's a valid assumption. Given the enhancements you've had done to free up your paws so you can carry your weapons. Bet you couldn't walk on four legs again if you tried."

"Will you shut up!" She tugged her bandanna from her head and wound it tightly in her paws. "Good grief, you could poison with your words alone."

"Well excuse me for being a little bit suspicious of the girl who just had a gun pressed against my chest!"

Surge flinched away from him and stared blankly across the room. Fresh tears welled up in her eyes and her shoulders rose and fell as she desperately tried to calm herself.

"Anyway," Macro said, a lot calmer. "I'm off. Don't think I'm giving you a single credit. I think attempting to take my life nulls any payment you were about to receive."

"No." Her words froze him before he could turn away. "No, don't go. There's… a reason I can't kill you."

He turned his head to frown at her. "And what's that?"

"I don't… I don't think you're in the wrong." Her green checkered bandanna was wrapped so tightly around her left paw it resembled a glove. "It's murder. I can't murder you. I couldn't murder anyone, but you…"

"Oh, I see." He glanced up at the ceiling and sighed. "Paying you with 'dates' is starting to make a lotta sense."

She flinched and looked away from him. "This is why bounty hunters don't generally form attachments. It makes our job a lot harder."

"Same could be said for space pirates." He tapped his claws against his arm and inclined his head on one side. "And if I knew for a minute 'bounty hunter' was part of your title, I would have avoided you like the plague."

"You knew why I was in Pulse City, Macro."

He snorted and looked over at the door. It almost beckoned to him. He itched to leave.

"Thing is," she said, "I never thought it would even be possible that I'd ever fall for a space pirate."

He jerked his head around to look at her again, his mouth slightly ajar.

"But you see," she went on, "I need to cover my tracks. I had to take this job. I was worried sick that Socket was gonna suss out I was the hacker. She knows you're responsible in some way, Macro. I couldn't let her think for a minute that-"

"So you were happy to kill me. Hot and cold, Surge. That about sums you up."

"No! I wasn't happy to kill you! I'm still not!" She clenched her teeth together and shook her head violently. "I don't want to kill you, but if I don't-"

"Leave it." He waved a paw at her and turned towards the door. "You do have a choice, you know. You can continue this job and try to hunt me down - and I'll fight back, believe me. Or you can drop it."

"Wait." Her paw fastened around his wrist and he looked back over his shoulder at her, meeting her frantic eyes. "I can drop it. If you stay with me… one night… I'll drop it."

His jaw went slack and he shook his head slowly. "Are you serious?"

"Yes. I'll drop it, then I'll hide. Socket will have to scour all of System to find me. And you."

"Are you even aware of what you're asking me?" he spat.

"Yes," she said. "Once night. That's all I ask."

"Forget it. I don't bargain my life like that."

He snatched his paw away and marched over to the door. As he pulled it open, he looked back at her. She stared down at the bandanna, slowly unwinding it from her paw. Those fresh tears fell free, but she wouldn't look up at him.

"It's the pachirisu, isn't it?" she said. "She got to you first."

"DL doesn't have anything to do with it," he said. "I warned you that you were playing a dangerous game, Surge. Now look at the state of you. Maybe you should quit. Don't you think you've hurt yourself enough?"

"In that case."

Her voice was laced with a warning. He paused with one foot outside the door and glanced back at her over his shoulder, his eyes narrowing dangerously.

"As soon as you leave this room," she said slowly, "we're enemies."

"Fine."

"No more favors. That's it. I'm not risking my life for you any more. I'll track you across System like a shadow, and you'll never see me

coming."

"I have a radar on my ship. I'll see you coming."

Surge chuckled and shook her head. "Did I mention your ship? I highly doubt you spotted me in Binary City, but you saw what I did to that magnezone and his fleet."

Macro's jaw dropped. "That was you?"

"Of course it was me. Let that be a warning to you that I never miss my target." She let the bandanna drop to her lap and fixed him with a confident stare, betrayed only by her damp eyes. "Mark my words, Macro. Once you leave this building, the chase is on. I'll give you an hour's head start from the second your ship leaves the docks. Given the damages it's taken, it's only fair. But after that, Hunter becomes the hunted."

Macro leered at her for a moment, trying to work out any deceit behind her words. None. She looked as confident as her words sounded. He snorted and slammed the door behind him.

No more favors.

He could live with that.

He shook himself sharply, trying to dislodge the lingering cobwebs that followed him from Surge's 'den'. As he marched over to the elevator, a sinking feeling hit his gut.

"Darn it, DL. I told you to wait!"

He rushed towards it and hit the button to call it back up to him. He stood with his arms folded, waiting for the ancient contraption to rattle its way up to him. He'd lost track of how long he'd been stuck in Surge's apartment. It could have been minutes, it could even have been an hour. He hoped desperately DL hadn't gone far. If she had, hopefully she'd be on his ship, safe.

The elevator seemed to mock him with its slow, creaking doors. He forced his way inside before they'd opened fully and pressed the button to close them. They didn't even meet, giving him an unnerving view of brick walls interspersed with the shadowy drop down the shaft.

An echoey ping resounded before the doors rattled open. Had it made that noise before? He looked up at it curiously as he exited into the lobby, then searched around for DL. His eyes fell on the pachirisu waiting by the door. She shifted from foot to foot, peering out at the bustling street.

"Decided to wait down here?" he asked.

She glanced at him then looked back outside. "I followed Matrix but… I don't know, I just didn't fancy going into the Moonlight Lounge right now."

"Pity. I was gonna get some dinner." He moved towards the door, holding it open for her to pass him.

"You took a while," she said.

"Yeh, well. I kinda had to sort some stuff out."

"Like what?"

"Leaving with my life intact for one thing." He caught a confused look from her and chuckled. "Don't worry about it."

"Well… I thought she seemed nice." DL stopped in front of him and fiddled with her belt. "Listen, I've been thinking. I'm clearly a burden to you, and if it helps, I can look for someone else to work for. I don't need the rest of those disks, but… I am wondering what happened to my parents. And there are a lot of pirates here who can-"

"Wait." Macro held up a paw. His heart was doing somersaults at every word and it was beginning to make him feel sick. "Slow down,

DL. I don't want you gone. I was just… upset."

"Upset?" She shook her head slowly. "You were upset with me. I could tell."

"It's not you who upset me." He scratched the base of his horn and glanced away. "Well… I guess it might be perceived as you, but the problem is all me, okay."

"I don't think I understand."

"It's simple." He met her warm eyes and spread his paws. "I'm a jerk, okay? I get upset easily then I say things I don't mean. I'm a total jerk."

"Are you trying to apologize?"

"I guess I am, yeh." He let his paws fall to his sides and sighed. "You're not a burden. I'm just… this isn't something I often admit to, but I'm absolutely terrified right now."

"Of Socket?"

"Of everything! This time and space nonsense, a human showing up, that creepy monster we shot down." He ran a paw over his head and hissed through his teeth. "Sometimes… all this stuff with your memories and BackDoor… it reminds me of it all, and I get scared all over again."

"So you're scared of me…" She glanced away from him and wound her paws together.

"No, I'm not scared of you. It's this ridiculous situation. You're innocent in all this. Just like me, you've found yourself pulled into it all. I should be helping you, not making you feel like trash."

"But you don't have to help me," she said quietly.

"Who else is going to?" He bit his lip as she looked away from him, then threw his back against the wall with a groan. "See what I mean? I'm a total… argh…"

"No," she said quietly. "I am amongst space pirates. You've told me enough times they're not nice pokemon. And I can't exactly ask government officials or the police for help, can I? Since they all work for her."

The venom in her voice as she referred to Socket sent a chill down Macro's spine.

"Well I want to help you," he said.

"Do you?" Again, the tone in her voice chilled him.

He bit his lip and stared past her. "Yes. I do. It's just… Like I said, things frighten me. Not just all this nonsense with Socket, but… I told you a space pirate always looks out for number one, right? You never know who you can trust. So I have this shield I put up to stop myself getting hurt. You make me drop that shield, and it worries me."

She looked right at him, meeting his eyes. Any coldness behind them melted away and he had to divert his attention to the wall, fixating on a poster for Spiced Tapu Cocoa.

"The last time I let anyone get close," he said, "I ended up getting hurt. Badly. Not just emotionally, either. She thought I were too reckless, and I'd stopped a freaking garchomp from slicing her up with his iron claws." His paw went to his scar and he sighed and shook his head.

"So you push others away," said DL.

He nodded and folded his arms. "Yeh. It's much easier to deal with pokemon I can't stand, if I'm honest."

"Wow." She let out a single laugh. "I'm not entirely sure whether or not to take that as a compliment."

"Don't," he said, looking straight back at her. "I'm a jerk. Just let me make it up to you, okay. I promise, if you still want my help, we'll get the rest of your memory disks back. After that, if you want to work for me on Wildcard Gamma, you can. If not, then…" He shrugged. "Then you can go. It's your choice, I'm not forcing you into anything."

She was silent for a moment, meeting his eyes. It took every nerve in his body to force himself to look back at her. It no longer felt like he was being plunged into chocolate fondue. It was more like drowning. Suffocating.

She inclined her head on one side and nodded. "Call me crazy, but I think I still want your help. Afterwards, however, I think I'll go my own way. That way, you still get shut of me."

Yep. Drowning.

He looked away from her and nodded, trying to hide any pain behind a dry chuckle. "It's a deal."

"Well, I guess we should get back to your ship." She looked over her shoulder at the still bustling street. "I could use a nap."

"Seriously?" He raised an eyebrow at her. "You've been out cold since dawn."

"I know, but I'm oddly tired."

"I'm more hungry than tired." It was a lie. He had no appetite whatsoever. "Since I didn't have to pay Surge, my wallet hasn't been sucked dry. So if you want some dinner-"

"No thank you." Her words sliced right through him. "I think I'd rather just have a nap."

He nodded and kicked himself back from the wall. "All right. I'll message Matrix that we've gone back to the ship. Although I doubt he'll have finished his game yet."

…

Government ships were rather intuitive in design. Widget had picked up the basics at the drop of a hat, so Tracer sat back and enjoyed the ride. Another thing that had struck him was how smooth and fast they were. They'd been flying for about a day and a half, leaving Meta City - and Socket's scowling face - miles and miles behind them.

The small cramped space didn't do wonders for the back, however.

Tracer stretched, his spine popping audibly. Widget flinched and looked over at him, his muzzle creased into a grimace.

"Wowzers," he said. "That can't be good for you. Sure you ain't getting arthritis?"

The delphox tutted and scratched behind his ear. "It's just the downside of sleeping in a chair. Man, I can't wait to get out of this ship and stretch my legs. Why won't they build sleeping quarters into these things?"

"Because they ain't long-haul ships."

Tracer scratched at the fur inside his left ear and yawned widely, then he reached into his inside pocket and pulled out his cigars. As he popped one between his teeth, he caught a raised eyebrow off Widget.

The eevee rolled his eyes and looked away. "Good job we ain't returning this ship, ain't it?"

Tracer almost dropped his cigar. "Pardon?"

"Oh yeh. Sorry." Widget laughed, creasing the green tattoo over his eye. "I guess I dreamt that conversation with you while you were sleeping. Yeh, we ain't returning it."

Tracer removed his cigar from his mouth, still unlit, and let it rest in his paw on his lap. "Care to elaborate?"

"Well, I was thinkin'," the eevee said, rather quickly, "that since we're chasin' after this human and her crew, a government ship might stand out a little bit. So I kinda changed our course."

Tracer's eyes narrowed as the reality of Widget's words sank in. He already knew the answer, but he asked anyway, cautiously, "May I ask where to?"

"Pulse City."

Tracer groaned and leant back in his seat, slapping his paw into his face.

"Hey, don't worry about it," said Widget all too cheerfully. "We'll sell this thing for spares and buy a better ship. One with beds, for one thing."

"You're trading government property for a space pirate ship…"

"Aye. Thought we could name it Undercover Shamus."

"That defeats the entire purpose of being undercover in the first place."

"Gotta admit though, the idea of an undercover detective flying around in one of them fish-themed ships is a pretty neat idea. Because this ship practically screams 'arrested'." Widget beamed at him then looked back out the window.

Tracer sighed deeply and lit up his cigar, taking a long deep drag to calm his nerves. Socket was going to hang, draw and quarter them. She already wasn't happy with him taking 'the little ragamuffin' on

board. Now he was suggesting they sell the very ship she'd lent them. It wasn't that he didn't have a valid point. He did. And there was no way either of them could afford to buy a ship from space pirates without first making a decent amount of money.

It was work. Maybe Socket would see it that way.

He let his eyes close and fell back into his seat. "How long until we reach Pulse City?"

"About fifteen minutes," said Widget. "I just gotta throw up the cloaking device. I don't want them sniping at us before we even reach the docks."

"Great. That leaves me with almost no time to try and blend in," the delphox groaned.

"Well I blend in fine!" said Widget. "You can borrow my scarf and wear it as a bandanna if you like?"

"When did you last wash it?"

Widget looked up at the ceiling in thought. "It was snowing."

"So more than six months ago." Tracer ran a paw over his head. "Fine, I'll consider it. Unless there's something stowed away in one of the little cupboards."

The delphox rose from his seat to check the little drawers and doors in the far corner of the cockpit.

"I also suggest dropping your cigars," said Widget. "I sincerely doubt space pirates smoke those things."

Tracer's tail drooped and he scratched his nose, grimacing slightly. "Fine."

Widget's humming filled the small ship as Tracer rummaged through the drawers and cupboard. Tools and metal knickknacks for ship

repairs filled one drawer, while others were empty or unexciting. Booklets and papers piled up around him in small heaps as he discarded them to search further back, most of which were user guides for the ship's intricate weaponry. If they were going to sell the ship, then they should probably burn them. Tracer eyed them for a moment, mulling over the predicament before dismissing it and returning to his search. He was soon rewarded by a pair of mittens cut away around the claws. From the shape alone, he assumed they must have belonged to a pokemon such as electabuzz or orangaru. Either way, they didn't fit him. But maybe he could use them…

He grabbed the tool kit from the first drawer and pulled out a pair of tiny scissors. He soon began working away at one of the gloves, cutting it along the sides and removing the cut-off claws. He held his handiwork out in two claws and frowned at it. A long, floppy length of black cloth. What on earth was he supposed to do with that?

"We're arriving at Pulse City," said Widget. "If you haven't found anything by now, you'll have to borrow my scarf."

"It wouldn't take a pokemon with a good sense of smell to know it isn't mine," Tracer muttered under his breath.

Widget laughed and hammered the dashboard with his paw. "I have you know I smell like daisies."

Tracer grabbed the rag in both paws and fastened it over his head at the back. As he returned to his seat, his reflection stared back out at him. His ear was cocked down to the right, and the former glove fastened like a badly fit bandanna. A thick tuft of orange fur stuck up in the middle of it like a candle flame. He licked his paw and tried to smooth it back to no avail.

"Trendy," said Widget.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Tracer. "I look like a fool."

"I never said you didn't." The eevee flashed his canines in a playful grin then pointed a paw at a city in the distance. "Arriving at Pulse City in T-minus five minutes!"

Tracer bit his lip and reached for his cigar. He didn't have the heart to tell Widget that made no sense.

As he puffed away, filling the cabin with smoke, he watched the neon city draw closer and closer. Obnoxious music filled the air filters, drumming against his ears. One of the turrets perched outside the glass dome turned as they passed by, following them closely. But it didn't fire. Just a threat. Something to say 'I see you' even though the ship was invisible to the naked eye.

Tracer raised an eyebrow at it and took a final drag of his cigar. So Pulse City had its own radar system. Duly noted.

Unwilling to fire perchance it was a friendly ship. He expected to find the docks manned to the gills with armed pokemon waiting to see if the invisible ship was a threat. His heart was in his throat. As soon as the cloak went down, they'd be exposed as government officials.

And Widget didn't look remotely scared. In fact, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

"All right!" The eevee turned the steering stick, spinning the ship around rather too fast in a bid to aim its nose at the docks. "We're here! Get ready to leap off, 'cos I'm lowering the cloak."

Just as Tracer had thought. Several imposing pokemon gathered at the docks, each with their own weapon. Varying sizes, but a majority of them a lot bigger than him. A tyranitar looked out at the sky, trying to spot any sign of an invisible ship, while a sceptile stood beside an aggron, keeping one eye on the ships while chatting to his companion.

There wasn't a single chance he was hanging around to see what happened when their ship was exposed. He leapt to his feet and

made for the door, reaching behind him for his trusty stick. Widget struck the dashboard with a paw and back-flipped from his seat, landing beside him with a thud and a mechanical whine as his enhanced skeleton absorbed the impact.

The door whirred open, letting in a cacophony of voices. Angry, curious. Clicks as weapons were raised and aimed towards the government ship. Tracer's heart was racing as he warred with staying aboard it and leaping off into gunfire.

Widget shot past him, landing heavily on the metal floor. A loud clang rang out, drawing all eyes to the small pokemon. One, an electivire, had rushed at the ship with his bionic arm raised, glowing and sparking with electricity.

"Woo! Whaddaya think?" The eevee strutted along the docks past the sparking giant, his tail held high. He nodded to the golden ship and grinned. "Stole her myself."

The electivire's eyes went to Tracer, and the detective nodded at him as he clutched his stick at his side. Refusing to relinquish it until the other pokemon put their weapons away.

"I mean, it was just parked up but I saw a chance!" Widget went on. "Bet ya don't see one of these very often, huh? Put her there!"

He raised a paw to the tyranitar. The space pirate eyed the eevee skeptically, then lowered a rocky paw towards him. Widget slammed his paw down onto the tyranitar's, causing the hulking pokemon to visibly flinch. Then Widget turned away to grin at the other waiting pokemon.

It wasn't a friendly gesture or clownish behaviour. It was a disguised display of strength, and the space pirates knew it.

"Now," he said, "refresh my memory. Who do I sell ships to around here?"

"You're selling this?" the aggron growled, although not in a threatening manner. He looked from the ship to the two detectives and back.

"You bet I am," said Widget. "I reckon pokemon would vomit cash for a ship like this! It ain't often you see government weaponry for sale here, is it? Not your usual retro stuff, or bootleg junk."

"Squirt's got a point." The sceptile folded his arms and looked over at the tyranitar who was desperately trying not to nurse his paw. "We ain't seen government weaponry here in years."

"So who does it go to?" Widget asked. "I've been away for a while, and I ain't lugging this thing into the black market. It's got a funny wheel."

Tracer stared down at the eevee. Still playful, but with a fire behind his eyes. How could he just outright lie like that? And so convincingly? Sure, a reformed criminal blended in a lot better in Pulse City than he himself did, but not once had Widget ever said he'd stepped paw in Pulse City. He'd kept all his conning and thievery inside Meta City and the outskirts.

"I think you're looking for me." A sandslash stepped out from a hut beside the docks, narrowing his eyes on the eevee. "I trade in ships in these parts. You wanna sell that government ship, then I might have a deal for ya."

Widget grinned from ear to ear. "Fantastic! What are you offering?"

The sandslash gestured for them to follow him, fixing the rest of the pirates with a leer. The curious group holstered their weapons - or in the electivire's case, switched them off - then skulked away into the streets.

"You might wanna cloak that." The sandslash nodded to the golden ship.

"Oh." Tracer cleared his throat and pulled the keys from his pocket. "Of course."

He pushed a small button on the control key, and the ship vanished from view like rippling water.

"Now, you're not wrong," said the sandslash as they entered his hut. "We haven't ever seen a government ship here. Not in one piece, anyway."

Tracer's nose crinkled as the sharp smell of oil tickled it, and he looked around the hut. Engine parts, wires and pipes adorned the walls, and heavy duty tools lay haphazard over the floor and the pirate's desk.

The sandslash fell back into a seat behind it and cleared some of the clutter aside with the sweep of a large paw.

"It's a good thing you didn't show up any earlier," he said. "You might've gotten torn to bits."

"Torn to bits?" Tracer resisted the urge to reach for a cigar.

"Aye. Some weird creature showed up just outside Pulse City. Took four ships and a small army to take it out, and it didn't go down without a fight. Took two ships down with it. Space pirates are calling it The Kraken."

Tracer scratched behind his ear and exchanged glances with Widget. "What did it look like?"

"I dunno. Some mutant jellicent or somethin'." The sandslash kicked his feet up on his desk and crossed one leg over the other. "Its remains are scattered over Baud City. Surprised you ain't heard of it, actually."

"We've been pretty busy," said Widget. "Stealin' a ship ain't easy, yanno."

"Yeah. I can imagine. Especially a government ship." The sandslash scratched his nose. "In fact, we don't get government weapons here very often at all anymore. Hunter were one of our main dealers, gatherin' up guns and explosives. But he quit that job years ago. He just deals in small jobs now, occasionally gatherin' weapon parts for our lasers. Nowhere near as insightful. Such a pity."

Tracer folded his arms and leant against the wall, careful to avoid knocking a saw down on himself. "I'd heard he'd dropped out of that. But I thought it were just a rumour."

"Guess you don't spend much time in Pulse City." The sandslash tapped his long claws on the desk. "Because such parts have been like gold showin' up here."

Widget frowned slightly at Tracer and raised an eyebrow. Tracer took the hint and shrugged his shoulders, saying no more. Widget then turned back to the sandslash and inclined his head on one side.

"So you're interested in my little treasure, then?" Widget flashed a grin.

"Aye. For a ship in good condition like that," the space pirate scratched behind his ear as he looked past the eevee, "I think I can offer two hundred and fifty thousand credits."

Tracer's jaw dropped, and a squeal came from Widget.

"You aren't serious?!" the eevee barked.

"I would have offered more." The sandslash shrugged. "But you said it has a funny wheel."

Widget sat with his mouth hanging open, staring dumbfounded at the sandslash. He shook his head sharply, his long ears flapping about on either side of his head, then laughed.

"Oh boy," he said. "The wheel let me down, eh? If it helps, I can fix it in no time flat."

Tracer scratched beneath his makeshift bandanna. Both he and Widget knew full well there was nothing wrong with the wheel. The ship was in perfect health. He wondered if Widget feared that and wanted to rush out and break it with a solid take-down attack.

The sandslash waved a paw. "No need. I can fix a wheel. Is it a deal? Or do you want to try sellin' it elsewhere? 'Cos there ain't no other ship dealers in Pulse City. I'm all you've got. Black Market will offer you peanuts for scraps. I doubt you'd even get one hundred thousand for parts."

Widget shrugged his shoulders. "Nah. It's fine. I'll take you're offer. We're actually looking for a new ship, if you've got one for sale?"

"I've got two." The sandslash rose to his feet and limped towards the back of the hut. "I keep them in my yard, if you wanna follow me?"

Tracer kicked himself from the wall and followed Widget carefully through the obstacle course of ship parts. The yard opened out into a separate section of the docks. Two ships stood looking lost and alone in the vastness. One was in the shape of a feebass, while the other was modelled on an alomomola. Neither of them looked particularly appealing.

Widget sat looking between the two and he raised an eyebrow, stretching the green chip-board tattoo over his left eye.

"Is this it?" he asked.

"Yep, this is all I've got in for now," said the sandslash. "Both are in good, working order. I test fly them from time to time just to make sure."

"Both rather girly." Widget sighed and flicked his tail. "Which one do you think, Number One?"

Tracer jolted slightly. Number One? Another part of Widget's crazy act. He looked up at both ships and let his left paw rest in his pocket.

"Do they have beds?" It was an important question, given how much time they'd be flying.

"The alomomola does," said the sandslash. "Although it only has two rooms. A lot of pirate crews tend to build their own ships, or modify them. If you wanted me to upgrade the feebass into a milotic, I'd only charge you the excess from the trade. One hundred and forty thousand credits."

Tracer heard his bank balance scream.

Widget shook his head. "Nah. That won't be necessary. We'll take the alomomola. How much is it?"

"Hundred and seventy thousand," said the sandslash. "But since you're tradin' that ship for it, I can do you a deal. Make it hundred and fifty. And I don't often do deals, but I'm interested in that ship. I wanna know what makes their weapons so effective."

"All right, deal." Widget closed his eyes in a smile and wagged his tail. "The change should fill her tank nicely."

The sandslash laughed and reached into his pouch, pulling out a small computer. "You're overestimating how much she can hold, kid. What's your bank code?"

Widget's ears drooped dramatically, but fortunately the sandslash didn't see. He looked over his shoulder at Tracer with an imploring stare. In their line of work, both their names were known on System Ground. There was every possibility Pulse City would have heard them, and they wouldn't react well to a pair of pirate hunters standing in their little haven. Tracer sighed and rubbed the bridge of his muzzle. So the eevee's lie only went so far.

He had to think fast.

He pulled out his own computer and searched through his bank transfers, feeling the sandslash's eyes on his.

There. Defrag.

He quickly read out the code, catching the space pirate's nimble claws flying over his tablet's screen. With a beaming grin, he said 'Done!' and popped the computer back into his pouch.

Tracer let out a silent sigh of relief and slipped his computer back into his trench coat pocket. He'd have to explain to Defrag later and have her transfer the money to Widget.

"I trust you know how to get the panel to recognise your chip?" the sandslash asked.

"Oh yes," said Widget. "That's fairly basic."

"Then she's all yours," said the sandslash. "Enjoy sailing the skies, boys."

The two detectives watched the pirate vanish back into his hut. Once he'd gone, Widget looked up at Tracer and nodded.

"That were some quick thinking," he said.

Tracer clenched his paws tightly and bent over, more from relief than frustration. "How could you not think that selling the ship would mean we might need-"

"Hey." Widget flicked his tail. "Did you think about it?"

"No, but-"

"Then don't jab me." Widget stood up and padded over to the ship. "Let's get on this thing and hot-tail it out of here."

Widget's paws flew over the panel, and the light turned from red to green. He nodded at Tracer to place his paw on it, and once he had

the door whirred open. A musty smell greeted them instantly as stagnant air was blown out of the air lock.

"Test fly from time to time my dewclaw." Widget flopped into the driver's seat and chuckled as he eyed the dashboard. "I've always wanted to drive one of these."

"You look oddly at home behind those controls," said Tracer.

"It's just common sense at the end of the day. Not exactly science."

Tracer took the seat beside him and pulled a cigar out of his pocket. "I think we need to talk."

"Oh?" Widget didn't look up. "What about?"

"Did you outright lie back there, or have you been here before?"

Widget shrugged. "Been lots of places."

"You never mentioned it."

"Yeh, well. It's a pretty scary time of my life. I got caught trying to con a space pirate once. Sold him a dodgy laser and he dragged me all the way out here." Widget flashed him a grin. "Had to con someone to take me back down to System Ground. Turns out space pirates are willing to do a few favours if you just throw your weight at them."

"Well, you can switch off your silver tongue," said Tracer. "I'm uncomfortable hearing you lie like that."

"I'm uncomfortable doing it, to be honest." Widget fired the ship's engine up and looked around the cockpit. "Might need a quick top up. Wanna hop out and grab the hose?"

"Sure, if you ring Socket and tell her you just sold her ship."

Widget let out a bitter laugh. "Not on your life. I think I've dodged execution enough times already. Besides, I'm sure she'll understand

when she finds out and discovers why."

"You mean after she skins you alive?"

"She'll have to get through you, first." The eevee gave him a playful wink.

Tracer sighed and pushed himself back to his feet. Part of him feared using his own credits would signal Pulse City to his presence. Or Socket, for that matter. Fortunately, the little machine didn't work like that. All it cared about was getting paid, even if it did overcharge a little.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 43

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows =D I've finished writing Arc 4 now, and it's long! The final chapter in this arc is 63, so that gives you some idea. I'm hoping Arc 5 will be the last, but you never know what might happen (I mean look at the Invasion Arc? That little stunt in Cyan City wasn't planned! Took me well off on a tangent. A fun tangent, but still.)

I hope you enjoy this arc, as it's been a roller coaster writing it. This chapter is a little short, mind. Also, if you'd be interested in updates twice a week as opposed to one, please let me know in a review. I am seriously considering it, given this arc will take about 3-4 months to finish uploading! So with that in mind, I may still be posting chapters into 2019!

Chapter Forty Three

The pyukumyuku ship chugged through the sky towards Pulse City's docks. Its ungainly form turned in a bid to park between a gorebyss and relicanth. It ended up parking at an odd angle, leaving a sizable gap between the door and the docks.

The exit hatch dropped open, flopping uselessly down the side of the ship. Annie peered over Trojan's shoulder and he let out a groan, slapping a paw against the hollow hull.

"Guess we're jumpin'." The words had all but left Annie's mouth as she hopped over the edge of the ship and landed in a crouch on the metal docks. The almighty clang drew eyes from all directions, and an incineroar's jaw hit the floor as he stared at her.

She rose to her feet and grinned. "Land ahoy!"

Trojan landed beside her and eyed the space pirates, a frown creasing his discoloured face. "I don't like the look o' this."

An electivire, his right arm entirely replaced with a robotic limb, stomped towards them with a tyranitar in tow.

"What's this?" The electivire pointed a claw at Annie, but his question had been aimed at Trojan. "We already took down one monster today. Don't go draggin' another one into Pulse City."

"I'm not a monster." Annie folded her arms and closed her eyes. "You are."

"This isn't some school ground joke, dear," came Web's voice from the ship. The skuntank turned her head to the electivire. "I can assure you she's no threat. She's just a little lost."

"Just a little lost?" The electivire waved a huge paw at her. "What is she? Ain't no pokemon I ever seen."

"She's an archeops." Trojan's voice drew a confused sneer from the huge electric type.

"A what?"

"An archeops," Trojan repeated. "Apparently they can shape-shift."

Annie puffed out her chest and grinned. "Name's Annie. Now where can we find some beds?"

"What? You don't have any beds on your ship?" the electivire sneered.

"Nope. 'Scuse me." Annie moved past him, pushing him aside with her hand. Her entire limb filled with static and she shook it sharply. "Wow. Tingly."

A low growl came from the electivire and he turned his entire body to leer down at her.

"Rather bold, aintcha?" he said.

"Yup." Annie wiped her hand on her jacket and looked up at him, not a hint of fear in her eyes. "Now. Beds. Where do I find one?"

The electivire's mouth hung open slightly, then it closed as he brought his jagged teeth together.

"You ain't armed," he said quietly. He brought his bionic arm up, electricity bouncing off it like a storm cloud about to strike. "Foolish mistake."

"Oi."

The warning was quiet, but firm. Enough to drag the electivire's head around to spot the threat. Waveform leant out of the ship door, a green and red arrow drawn back on one of his vines. The entire lower half of his face was hidden behind a black neckerchief, and his red eyes were narrowed into slits.

"Step away, and I'll let you go," he said. "Touch her, and I'll turn you into a pin cushion." He then nodded towards the tyranitar. "The same goes for your silent friend."

The electivire looked from Waveform to Annie, then his eyes wandered over to Trojan. The scrafty placed a paw inside his trouser-like fur and wiped his other paw across his nose.

"You wanna throw the entire docks into a brawl?" he asked.

Web leapt from the ship door and landed daintily on the docks. Her tail fell over her back to rest on her head like the barrel of a cannon, but her expression remained soft.

The electivire took a step back and nudged his companion. They both marched away, casting glances over their shoulders as they vanished beyond the ships.

"Well done, crew." Annie turned to face them and beamed. "Shall we go look for beds now? Because I'm really tired and no one wants a

grumpy Annie."

Waveform leapt from the door, using his wings to steer himself over the docks. Zip let out a cry of delight, his entire contraption held steadily in the decidueye's talons. He placed him gently beside Annie and landed on her other side with a gentle beat of his wings. He'd completely abandoned his silver quiver, leaving it on the ship.

He looked down at Web. "Can you recommend anywhere?"

The skuntank shrugged her shoulders and let her tail relax behind her. "It's been a long time since I was last here. Things might have changed."

"Then I suggest we ask someone," said Annie.

"What the jack kinda idea is that?" Trojan scoffed. "You saw what just happened."

"She has a point," said Web. "And I know where we can ask. We need to buy weapons anyway, so we'll pay a little visit to the black market."

Annie yawned widely and shrugged. "I was gonna leave that until tomorrow, but all right. If you think it'll get us a bed sooner."

They turned and marched down the docks. The incineroar turned his head to watch their every move, his jaw still hanging open.

Web led the way through the bustling streets, trying her best to ignore the shouts of surprise from the space pirates. Annie strolled along sandwiched between Trojan and Waveform, while Zip skittered along ahead of her, casting wary eyes over the rabble of pirates.

"Everyone's looking at me," he whispered.

"That's because you're awesome," said Annie. "Keep walking, kid."

The goldeen swallowed audibly and caught up with Web, trying to distract himself by engaging her in conversation. But the skuntank's mind was elsewhere as she eyed the passing buildings and billboards.

Annie folded her arms and huffed as they passed a magmar who reached for his laser as soon as his eyes fell on her.

"You'd think this lot had never seen a human before," she said.

"Of course not," said Waveform. "None of us have ever seen a human. Or an archeops."

"You're one of a kind," said Trojan.

"I am pretty unique," she said.

Waveform placed his wing around her shoulders and steered her away from a set of bared teeth. As she pulled back she realised they belonged to the enraged face of a kommo-o. The lanky lizard bounced on his feet then rushed at them, claws raised. Trojan brought his arm up in an arc and struck the kommo-o's jaw with a sickening crack. He went reeling backwards into an outdoor table occupied by a pair of cacturne, and sending playing cards flying into the air. They drifted down onto his dazed body like giant snowflakes.

The two cacturne snapped their heads up and leered at the scrafty.

He placed his paw into his trouser fur and tutted. "You guys head to the market without me. I'll be right here."

Waveform shook his head and sighed. "Couldn't wait to get into a brawl, could you?"

Trojan said nothing as he tugged a small electric saw from his fur.

Annie let out a long whistle and found herself steered away down the bustling street under Waveform's wing.

"We're going to lose Web at this rate," he said.

The skuntank strutted on ahead of them, casting an occasional glance over her shoulder. Her jaw went slack slightly when she spotted Trojan and she shook her head. Regardless, she didn't stop.

A large building spread across the road ahead of them, almost as though it was trying to look imposing. 'Market' was written across it in giant, green letters. Or it was meant to be. It was missing a 'k'.

Voices rose to a crescendo inside, amplified by the bare walls. But they began to fade out as Annie strolled through the crowd with her entourage. Mouths snapped shut or hung open as eyes - surprised, confused, angry, scared and worried - all fixed on her. The entire inside of the market was like a cocktail of emotions, and it washed over Annie like a harmless wave.

Web scanned the market stalls, eyeing the sellers and their goods. Many of them sold weapons, but the pokemon behind the tables did not look welcoming. As she turned her head to scan the fifth row of stalls, her shoulders jolted and she picked up pace, trotting towards the unmanned table.

Or at least it looked unmanned.

The pokemon behind it was rather… small. And green.

The small bug tried to look as imposing as possible, narrowing his black eyes at the towering human. He glanced at Web and stretched up onto his back legs.

"I think I recognise you," he said slowly.

"You should do. I was in here almost every day," she said. "The name's Web."

He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully then they snapped wide open. "Oh! Web! Yes… not a name that makes one dance with joy, I can

tell ya. I recall you ripped me off more than once."

"What? You scammed this poor bug?" Annie raised an eyebrow at Web and shook her head. "Shame on you."

The skuntank shrugged. "Little Worm here scams his own fair share of pirates. The whole city does. But they don't like it when you scam them back."

"What do you want, anyway?" he asked. "'Cos whatever it is, I ain't got it."

"Weapons," said Web. "I can see you have quite a selection here."

"Aye, but many of them don't have coils," he said. "You can take that little dispute up with Hunter."

"Hunter?" Annie scratched her chin and looked up at the ceiling.

"He's one of Pulse City's most wanted space pirates," Web explained. She turned back to Worm and smirked. "I guess he scammed you?"

"Hunter's one of my main providers," said Worm. "But he did stiff me on some coils. I made him buy me a drink as compensation and I'm not done with him, either. He owes me several for that little stunt."

"Friends, then?" Web shrugged. "We'll take four guns with all their parts."

"That's ten thousand credits a piece, my fine lass," said Worm.

"Ten thousand?!" Web's jaw dropped. "Who has that kind of money?!"

"Space pirates," said Worm. "Cough it up."

"Pay the 'mon," said Annie.

Something creaked in her ear and Worm's eyes flew wide open. Annie glanced out of the corner of her eye to spot Waveform with an arrow held against his vine string.

"What are you aiming an arrow at me for?" Worm squeaked. "Fine! Seven thousand each, and I go no lower!"

Another creak.

"Make it five thousand," said Annie.

"Wait… what's with the change in attitude?" Worm stuttered. "All right, fine. Five thousand each. Just don't kill me."

He sobbed and ducked behind his table.

Waveform's vine snapped back into his feathers and he reached into his belt pouch. Two ten thousand credit bills landed on the table amongst the chaos of weapon parts.

Worm jerked his head up and removed his paws from his leafy head. An audible sigh left his throat and he gathered the over-sized notes into his over-sized bag.

"Four lasers." He fixed cold eyes on the two pokemon. "Grab 'em and go."

Annie leant forward but Web beat her hand aside. She reached for two guns and quickly examined them, her expert claws flying over the tiny parts before dropping one of them into Annie's hands.

"Put it in your pocket," Web instructed.

She retrieved another two guns, checked them over, and handed one to Waveform.

He waved a paw at her and turned his back to leave. "I don't need one."

Web's jaw dropped and she chased after him with Annie and Zip in tow. "What do you mean you don't need one?"

Annie faltered and looked back at the market stall. Zip skidded to a halt and turned to join her.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked. "We're going to lose them?"

"Oi, Worm." Annie marched back to the table, drawing the bug pokemon's attention.

His entire body quivered and he looked away from her.

"We need beds," said Annie. "Know anywhere?"

"Moonlight Lounge," he said. "If that's too pricey, you want Fuchsia Avenue. Little place on there called Bricked Inn. Place is a dump but you can get a week's worth o' nights there for the price of one at Moonlight Lounge."

Annie nodded and turned away. Zip's mechanical feet followed close behind her. She paused and glanced over her shoulder.

"Which way?"

Worm chuckled and looked up at her. "Newbie, eh? Follow the main road. You can't miss Moonlight Lounge. Fuchsia Avenue runs behind it."

Annie gave him a wave and turned to march through the market. She pushed through a startled crowd of onlookers then bumped face first into a feathered torso.

"What the-"

She wiped a paw across her face and looked up into Waveform's scarlet eyes. He narrowed them slightly then his shoulders relaxed with a sigh.

Annie raised a hand and pointed a finger towards the door. "I found us some beds."

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Tracer leant on the side of the alomomola ship, now docked amongst the other space pirate ships. Regardless of Widget's concerns, he finished off his cigar, puffing smoke into the clean air.

"Pretty shoddy parking, huh?" Widget frowned at the pyukumyuku ship, situated at an angle so it was almost touching the relicanth beside it.

Tracer stubbed his cigar out on one of the bollards and popped the remains in his inside pocket.

"Given the creature driving it was likely not a space pirate nor a pokemon, I'm not surprised," he said.

"What makes you think the human were driving it?" Widget asked.

Tracer shrugged. "I'm not saying she was. Regardless, that ship and its crew are a hazard, and I'm loathe to leave Pulse City while they're still flying that monstrosity throughout System."

The delphox kept his voice low so as not to drag attention from the surrounding space pirates. Occasional glances were fired their way, but given Widget's little performance earlier on, it was likely more envy or repressed admiration than suspicion.

Tracer looked up from the pyukumyuku to the other docked ships. Standing huge and proud amongst the rabble was the familiar blue form of Wildcard Gamma. The schooling wishiwashi looked like it had seen better days. All its turrets were out, stationary around its middle. Every now and then, a muscular granbull appeared around the nose to stare at the ship before vanishing once again. Tracer had already been to see what he was doing. He was repairing a huge

hole in the side of the ship where the detective guessed one of the turrets had been blasted away.

Likely in that attack the ship dealer had told him about.

He reached into his pocket for another cigar.

"Want me to get you some pirate cigarettes?" Widget asked. "Because as far as space pirates are concerned, you look like a fool. A posh fool."

"I'm not sucking on those vile sticks," said Tracer. "Let me mull things over, will you?"

"Then do it on the ship."

"I don't want to. It smells like sweat and wet fur." Tracer lit up his cigar and leant back on the ship's pink hull. "We have a predicament here, and I'm trying to work it out."

"Whether or not to ring Socket and cough up that we stole her ship?" Widget whispered, snickering slightly.

"You're enjoying this way too much for any sane 'mon," said Tracer.

"I just love winding up Socket."

"Well, one day, that might land you in the execution seat." Tracer removed his cigar and blew out a stream of smoke. "And I'm not willing to keep bending the truth to bail you out."

"Then use bribery."

"As much as I have suspicions about our lovely Mayor, I'm not going to bribe her. That's ridiculous."

Widget shrugged his shoulders. "Then say nothing. Wait until we've apprehended the human girl. Socket'll be putty in your paws then."

"You two keep mentioning a human." A huge, towering shadow fell over the two detectives. "And I'm gonna pretend I didn't hear you sayin' you're workin' for the Mayor."

Tracer looked up with as much confidence as he could muster, while Widget let out a nervous laugh. An incineroar stood over them, leaning on the alomomola's nose. He scratched his whiskered chin, sending a small flurry of dandruff down onto his broad shoulder.

"I dunno," said Widget. "Would it be completely out of the ordinary for Socket to hire a couple of space pirates to do her dirty work?"

The incineroar seemed to consider this. Then he frowned, his striped brow furrowing.

"Yes," he said.

The word sent a chill down Tracer's spine.

"Anyway, you mentioned a human," the space pirate went on. "I think I've seen one."

"Really?" Tracer stubbed out his cigar on the bollard again and popped it into his pocket. "What makes you think that?"

"'Cos there ain't no pokemon look like that." The incineroar tapped the side of his head with a claw. "I ain't no dense brick, delphox. I seen some weird creature with long black fur on its head walkin' through Pulse City with a water dweller on mechanical legs. And three other pokemon, but I don't remember what they were. I were too bothered by the strangeness of it all to really process everythin'. They came in that pyukumyuku there."

Tracer followed his claw to the badly parked ship.

"Yes," he said. "We saw them take off in that. Did you see where they went?"

"They were headed to the Black Market." The incineroar folded his arms and leant back on the alomomola. "What's goin' on? Where did a stinkin' human come from?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out." Tracer popped his unlit cigar back between his teeth then pulled out his computer. "I usually love puzzles, but this one has me pulling out my fur."

"It ain't related to that weird squid thing everyone saw earlier, is it?"

"Squid thing?" Widget's nose crinkled.

"The Kraken," the incineroar said. "It's all over Pulse City's news. You can't have missed it."

"No, we've heard about that." Tracer pulled up the relevant article. "As for whether or not they're linked…"

His voice trailed off as he read over it. The picture was as clear as day. A huge, jellyfish-like creature with no face to speak of. It looked eerie. Almost ethereal, as though it didn't belong in System at all. Pretty fitting, given it didn't.

In one of the photos, it was wrapped around a basculin ship, stuck to its head like a barnacle. The basculin had hold of another ship in its jaws, wrenching the metal away. There wasn't enough of the target to see the ship in detail as it was blocked out by Wildcard Gamma's spinning turrets.

Someone had thought to photograph the fight rather than flee… That was some bravery. It meant there was evidence that something very wrong was going on in System.

Tracer lowered his computer and tried to puff on his cigar, realising too late that it wasn't lit. He let out a small sigh and looked up at the incineroar.

"You want to know what's going on," Tracer said. "That's understandable. Your city has fallen under attack, and now there's a rowdy human walking around in it."

"Certainly were rowdy, aye," said the pirate.

"What's your name, sir?" Tracer asked.

The incineroar burst into laughter, sliding down the side of the ship. He caught himself before his tail hit the floor and shoved himself back to his feet.

"Sir? Ain't no one called me sir since I were a kit." He took a few breaths to gather himself and wiped a claw across his eye. "Wow, you ain't no pirate. That's for sure."

Tracer bit down on his cigar, bracing himself for the burly tiger pokemon to turn on him. But instead, the incineroar flashed him a toothy grin. Both unnerving and friendly at the same time.

"Name's N0ize," he said.

Tracer nodded and looked back down at the news article, looking over its photos again. "Very well, N0ize. How would you like to help us?"

"Help you?" N0ize frowned and looked the two detectives up and down. His eyes lingered for a while on Widget. "You ain't pirates. You bounty hunters?"

Tracer exchanged glances with Widget, noting the warning look in the eevee's eyes.

"I can assure you we aren't bounty hunters," said Tracer. He dropped his voice to a near whisper, and N0ize had to cock his ears to hear it. "We're detectives, asked to track down that human you saw."

N0ize's lip curled into a sneer and he looked away from them, folding his huge arms as he leant back on the ship.

"Pair o' runners, eh? Snoopin' around. Knew somethin' smelled off 'bout you two."

Widget flicked his tail and pulled his ears back, but if N0ize noticed he didn't perceive the eevee as a threat.

"You honestly must be curious?" said Tracer. "That creature. Now a human. Something is amiss, and it might be threatening System."

"Did the Mayor send you?" N0ize asked.

"Did she send us to Pulse City?" Tracer tapped his computer on his paw. "No. She did not."

"So you're here of your own free will? Just flew here in a government ship?"

"Then sold it," said Widget. "Yes."

N0ize roared with laughter and shook his head. "Mayor's own cronies sell her ship. Love it. You guys got guts, I'll give you that. Some real guts, just marchin' into space pirate territory. Couple o' little fuzzies like you."

"And you're just stood here talking to us," said Tracer.

"That's 'cos you guys puzzle me." N0ize scratched behind his ear. "Come here, and sell the Mayor's ship? Tells me you don't trust her."

"Where'd you pick that up?" Widget asked. "Just from that?"

"'Cos a space pirate's ship is his essence. It's his personality, right? Everything he stands for goes into that ship. You fly here in one of Socket's ships and sell it? It's like you're gettin' shut of her."

Tracer wiped a paw across his nose and looked back down at his computer, but he wasn't really seeing it. The incineroar's words were ringing around in his mind.

That CCTV footage. The human's words. A lab.

"Are you going to help us or not?" Tracer's voice came out firmer than he would have liked, given the circumstances.

He cast a wary glance to the large space pirate, but all that greeted him was a toothy grin.

"Go on then," said N0ize. "Let's track down that human. But I don't work for free."

Tracer readied himself to bring up his bank account. "What's your price?"

N0ize grinned from ear to ear. "Information."

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 44

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Forty Four

Macro smoothed down his clean fur, feeling a lot better after a good, long shower. He'd worried nothing would have been enough to get that experience off him. The battle was eerie enough, but Surge's attempt at his life and following perverse request had left him feeling rattled and filthy. He shook the memory from his mind then turned to the wash basin. His scarf lay in a pool of bubbles, still soaking to remove the remains of caterpie silk. A quick rinse and drain revealed his attempts - well… third attempt - had been successful in getting rid of it all.

Now he just had to dry it.

With a defeated sigh, he resigned himself to the idea of being scarfless for a little while. He flashed open the washroom door and slipped out into the hallway, turning towards his room. A movement to his left drew his eye and he spotted DL on her way from the kitchen. She paused to look at him and raised a paw to wipe a smear of chocolate from beside her nose. That suggested to him she'd probably eaten more than she'd been making. Where did she put it all?

"You look smaller without that on," she said, nodding to the soggy bundle in his arms.

He shrugged and absently smoothed the sodden article over his arm. Ordinarily such a sugar coated insult would have angered him, but somehow the sheer fact she'd said anything at all was a blessing in and of itself.

"It'll be dry and back on in no time," he said.

She made a little noise that might have been 'oh' and leant against the door frame, turning her head to look back at the cockpit.

The attempts at small talk pained him. He grimaced inwardly and made his way towards his room.

"Supper will be in ten minutes," she called after him.

He paused mid-step, but didn't look back. One nod, then he pressed on towards his room. Whether or not she saw it he didn't know.

Once his scarf was tossed over the foot of his bed frame, he turned to leave and faltered. The black scarf he'd left drying on the frame previously lay in a crumpled heap just beneath the bed amongst the dust. One colour… well. If you discounted the grey clinging to the black fabric. With a heavy sigh, he left it and marched back towards the cockpit.

Anchor's seat was still empty. Loud clanging noises came from outside as the granbull repaired the ship's damage, hidden completely from view. Matrix, however, was situated in his navigator's seat. His tiny paw flew across the keyboard as Macro entered, chatting on some online community, and he fired a quick greeting over his shoulder.

"Don't shirk work," said Macro.

"Well we aren't going anywhere," said Matrix.

Macro fell into his seat and rubbed at his exposed neck. The draft from the open door was unbearable. Wow, he felt naked.

"We'll be going somewhere soon enough." He pulled his computer out of his pocket and brought up the list of disk locations. "As soon as Anchor's done with the repairs, we can bid goodbye to Pulse City."

"You make it sound final," said Matrix.

"It might be."

The ribombee span his seat around and fixed him with a look of utter confusion. His eyes were impossibly wide, making his already tiny face look even tinier.

"We're not coming back?" he asked, calmly. "What did you do?"

Macro sneered and looked back at his computer. "I didn't do anything."

"Did you cheese off Surge?"

"Turns out she isn't an ally," said Macro. "Drop it."

Matrix's seat made a small squeak as he turned it back to the navigation system. Macro thought he heard him load up one of his retro games again.

Macro scanned over the locations. Botnet City and Meta City both left a bad taste in his mouth. As he looked down at The Cache, his heart froze. Had the list always had that sun-shaped emblem behind it? And if so, why have it right at the bottom of the page? The way it was written, The Cache was printed right over it. None of the other locations so much as touched it.

His ears filled with ringing and he dropped his computer onto the dashboard. Twisting in his seat, he caught Matrix's eye. The navigator raised an eyebrow.

"Someone's jumpy." He fluttered from his seat, the dull drone of his wings joining the obnoxious bell. "Woo, supper time!"

Macro sank back into his seat and rubbed at his temples. What had gotten into him? He retrieved his computer, stuffing it into his pouch as he headed towards the kitchen.

Anchor passed him in the hallway, wiping his huge paws with an oily rag.

"Suppose I'd better get freshened up," he said. Then he looked Macro up and down, a small frown creasing his features. "You alright, Cap'n? You look a little spooked."

Macro waved him off. "I'm fine. How much longer until we fly?"

"We're about done. I just have to check the repairs don't mess with the turrets. I'll fire 'em up after supper and if they spin, we can go."

Macro nodded and tried his best to shrug off the black cloud hovering over him.

"Fantastic. Sure you can't do that now?" he asked.

"I am pretty hungry," Anchor grumbled.

"Okay." Macro really couldn't shake that black cloud. "Let's just have supper."

He tried to mask his anxiety by rubbing at his face with both paws, slowly making his way into the kitchen. Anchor's warm paw fell onto his bare shoulder, freezing him in his tracks. Macro craned his neck around to look up into Anchor's face. The granbull's brow was furrowed so much so his eyebrows almost met.

"You sure you're alright?" he asked.

Macro stared back up at him, open-mouthed. What was he supposed to say? That he felt awful about DL? Betrayed by Surge? Tell him everything that went on, and that they'd be fleeing for their lives?

Surely he should tell them the latter.

He pushed Anchor's paw away and turned into the kitchen, taking his usual seat opposite DL. The pachirisu met his gaze briefly before reaching for a bowl of soup.

Soup?

Macro took a bowl and sniffed it cautiously. Not Cookie's usual sweet supper, that was for sure. Instead it smelled savoury. And… was that nutpea he could smell? His mouth filled with saliva and he grabbed a spoon, almost knocking Matrix off his seat.

"Easy, Captain." Cookie chuckled as he leant over the table, holding a plate of steaming buns. "We have bread to go with it, too."

Macro's nose twitched. There was the sweet stuff he was familiar with. Yet not a single layer of frosting in sight. Regardless, he grabbed one, still warm in his paws.

"I thought we'd try something different," said DL. "Somehow, I already knew this recipe. I guess it came with the recent memory disk."

Macro was going to respond, but his mouth was full of bread. Instead, Anchor lowered his spoon and beat him to it.

"How are you handling that, by the way?" he asked.

"The memories?" DL shrugged. "I think I'm past the shock. I've actually been doing some thinking."

"Cooking's pretty good for that." Cookie fell into his own seat and began pouring sugar into his soup. "I do a lot of thinking in this kitchen."

DL smiled at him warmly, her paws twitching slightly as she watched the slurpuff's soup fill with sugar. Macro feared for a moment she'd start wrestling the dispenser out of Cookie's paws.

"It does help, he's not wrong." She turned to the other space pirates. "But… I've decided I do actually want all my memories back. So retrieving those disks isn't in vain anymore."

"It was never in vain," said Macro. "It's in your right to have them."

She shrugged. "To me it felt like that. But I actually want to know what happened that landed me in that orphanage. Was I always there? Or did something happen to my parents?"

Macro looked down at his soup as he spooned some into his mouth. "Valid questions."

"Do you remember anything else?" Matrix asked. "Anything related to… well, Socket's crazy idea?"

DL snorted, a sound that didn't suit her remotely. The look of disgust on her face lit a fire in Macro's chest and he remembered exactly why they were doing all this. Any child could have ended up in DL's situation. Taken into a warm home and then deceived. Turned into an experiment.

"Like I said, I remember all of it," she said. "And then some. I have access to the Download Database again, and amongst all that is the very reason Socket even adopted me." DL leant her head on one paw and poked at her bread. "She never wanted a child. It was all planned from the start. Adopt the oldest child in the orphanage, lure them into a false sense of security and get everyone familiar with them as her adopted child. Oh, lovely Mayor! Adopts a child in need! Once that was all established, when the child turns eighteen, her plan gets thrown into action. No one suspects a thing."

"So it was an elaborate trap?" Macro scoffed.

Matrix wound his antenna in his paw and leant on the table. "I prefer the term 'ruse'."

"'Trap' sums it up nicely," said DL. "It certainly felt that way towards the end."

"Something doesn't add up though," said Anchor. "You said you were turned in at a lab in Meta City. But we picked you up from some strange distribution centre at the edge of System."

DL's eyes went distant and she scratched her jaw. "That would be The Cache."

Macro dropped his spoon into his bowl, splashing hot soup down himself and eliciting a small squeak of surprise from Matrix.

DL jolted in her seat and fixed him with wide, chocolate eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Macro grabbed a towel from Cookie and dabbed down his creamy fur, now sticky with berry soup. "I've just heard of that place. It's one of the locations for your memory disks."

"Oh." She rubbed her nose and looked away from him. "Well I'm guessing it's not a distribution centre like you believe. I think Yobi must have done something prior to me going there. Because that's listed as the location I was 'made'."

"Maybe he changed your data chip," said Matrix.

"Maybe. Because what I remember of that chip you had removed, the information doesn't match up. It was just lies."

"Yeh," said Macro. "If it were your original one from birth, it would have said 'Loop' and not 'Download Database'."

"Why change it?" Cookie asked. "Wouldn't it make more sense to leave it, cover their tracks?"

DL pointed at the slurpuff. "He has a valid point. But… that chip was more for tracking. And given I wasn't 'Loop' anymore, they changed it. It's not uncommon for pokemon to change their names. Is it?" She gave Macro a pointed stare.

He sank slightly in his seat and absently stirred his soup.

"Well, in that case," said Anchor, "if The Cache is that secret government building, I guess our next stop is Botnet City? Save the dangerous zones for last."

The mere name of the city left a bad taste in Macro's mouth. He bit his lip and stared into his soup. It was a logical suggestion. They had a higher chance for success. But sooner or later, they'd have to visit Meta City and The Cache. Did it really matter what order they did it in?

Everyone's voices blended together as Macro mulled over their options and DL's story. It felt like things were both falling into place and becoming more confusing at the same time. He barely tasted his soup, eating it more out of habit than anything else. Once he'd scraped the bowl clean, he pushed it aside and slipped from his seat. It was only then he realised that Matrix and DL had both vanished, and Cookie was already cleaning the dishes.

Anchor leant back in his seat as he tipped his bowl to drain the contents, slurping loudly. With a satisfied sigh, he brought the bowl back down to the table and wiped a paw across his mouth. His eyes flicked towards Macro and he grinned.

"Not wanting seconds?" he asked.

Macro shook his head and pointed towards the cockpit. "I'm gonna go fire up our next location. You wanna check the turrets? Sooner we leave, the better."

The granbull stood up, his chair scraping across the floor like claws on a chalkboard. "May as well."

He followed Macro into the cockpit then flopped into the driver's seat. Macro hesitated beside his own chair. DL was already buckled in, fiddling with the dashboard's controls.

"What are you doing?" he asked her.

"Learning." She looked up at him briefly. "If I'm going to become a space pirate I need to know how these ships work."

"You've already had weapons training," he said.

She shrugged. "Maybe I want to know how to drive? Or be a captain?"

Macro grit his teeth together, but not out of anger. It was much clearer to him now. She really was considering leaving.

Anchor, however, hadn't picked up on that at all. He roared with laughter, slamming his heavy paw on the dashboard.

"Careful, Cap'n," he said. "Sounds like she's plannin' a mutiny!"

Macro shook his head and fell into the seat beside her. He didn't even bother with the seatbelt. He tugged his computer from his pouch and brought up the locations again.

"Alright, here we go!" said Anchor. "One turret test comin' up!"

"Make sure Pulse City know what you're doing this time," said Matrix.

Anchor muttered something under his breath, then the familiar clunks and clangs of the turrets firing into position echoed throughout the cockpit.

Macro scrolled through the locations with a claw, reading each of them. Three down. Two more disks to go. Three locations remaining. Meta City and Botnet City looked imposing even in text. As he reached The Cache, that yellow sun symbol was still there.

Maybe Anchor was right. Maybe they should just get Botnet out of the way.

The turrets whirred, the racket drowning out the voices in the small cockpit and Cookie's jovial singing. Macro continued to stare at the list of names, a rising dread filling his chest and making his pulse race.

His eyes unfocused, then something flashed. He didn't know what it was, but his first thought was that another pirate had fired at them.

But there was no impact. No angry shouts, no retaliation from Anchor.

Macro's computer slipped from his paws, landing with a clatter on the floor. His paw went to his head and he groaned, clenching his teeth together. He couldn't see a thing. Everything was just noise. Turrets, voices, singing. More voices. He became increasingly aware that someone was shaking him.

He shook his head, trying to clear his vision. It didn't hurt, not remotely. If anything, his head felt like a cloud. The ship came back into focus, save for some random dazzle spots. Every time he turned his head, they followed, like he was looking at a map of the stars. And there was one. Much bigger than the other, shaped like a sun.

He turned to look down at DL, her eyes wide and fearful. Her paws were wrapped around his arm tightly and her shoulders rose and fell as she tried to calm herself. Over her shoulder he spotted Anchor and Matrix, both of them staring at him in bewilderment. Anchor's jaw was slightly open and he cleared his throat before speaking.

"You alright, Cap'n?" he asked.

"Yeh." Macro rubbed his eyes, trying to clear the dazzle spots. "Yeh, I'm fine."

"You sure? 'Cos you look like you need a lie down."

"I said I'm fine."

Macro bent in his seat to retrieve his computer. It had landed just underneath the dashboard. As he looked over it for any damage, he realised the page was still open. His eyes fell on The Cache, still emblazoned on its sun symbol.

And beneath it were its co-ordinates. Had they always been there? As he looked over the other locations they were blank. No co-

ordinates, just The Cache. Something felt odd about it. Why write them down? Why give this place special treatment?

"Put these co-ordinates in, Matrix," he said. "Two, four, six, three, five, seven."

Matrix twisted in his seat and raised an eyebrow. "That doesn't even make any sense."

"What are you talking about?" Macro turned to face him. "They're right here."

He held out his computer to the ribombee. Macro knew nothing about co-ordinates, but his suspicions were rising about The Cache. And with his suspicions came curiosity. He was adamant more than ever to find that place, even if it meant searching the far corners of System to track it down again.

Matrix frowned at his computer, flicking his antenna around in his paw. "There's nothing there."

"Yes there is!" Macro snapped. He leapt from his seat and pointed over Matrix's shoulder right at the string of numbers. "It's right there!"

Matrix shook his head. "I don't see anything."

"Right there! Written beneath 'The Cache' in black numbers! Right here, in this sun shaped symbol thing!" He traced a claw around the symbol.

"Sun?" Matrix narrowed his eyes and looked up at Macro. "Are you having an episode?"

Macro's jaw went slack and he stared at Matrix, dumbfounded. He couldn't see it? Macro looked back down at the screen. There it was, as clear as day. A yellow sun behind The Cache. The co-ordinates, or what he thought were co-ordinates.

Anchor and DL stood behind him on either side, both staring at the computer.

"There's nothing there, Cap'n," Anchor said softly.

Macro shook his head slowly. "But I see it." He turned to DL. "Do you?"

The pachirisu shook her head and looked back down at the computer. Silent. Pawing at her left ear anxiously.

Was he going crazy?

Macro swallowed dryly. No. He wasn't going crazy. He could see it. He knew he could see it.

"Put in those numbers anyway," he told Matrix.

"But they won't work," said Matrix.

"Just do it!"

Matrix muttered under his breath and turned to his keyboard, punching in those numbers. Macro watched with bated breath. It had to work. He had to know he wasn't going crazy.

The navigation screen zoomed out, showing Wildcard Gamma as a blinking green dot. Another dot flickered on the screen, up in the far north-east corner.

Matrix let out a stunned 'uh' then looked at Macro over his shoulder. "It found it."

"They work?" DL gasped.

Macro felt his head spin and he staggered backwards into Anchor. A chuckle left his throat as it sank in. He wasn't going crazy. Or if he was, he looked a little saner for a while.

"Well, I don't know what's going on," said Anchor. "But I was about to send you to bed due to overwork." He steadied the mawile back on his feet and looked him over. "Although I'm still considering it."

Macro waved a paw, still chuckling. "Let's get a move on."

"You can certainly get a move on," said Anchor, turning him towards the door. "Right to bed. I don't think you've slept since DL passed out."

The pachirisu looked up at Macro with a start. He cleared his throat, wanting to bite back at the granbull. But he found himself being steered down the corridor towards his room.

"Fine, I'll sleep," he said. "But you promise me you won't let Matrix change those co-ordinates."

"I wouldn't worry about that," said Anchor. "I reckon he's as intrigued as you are that they've worked. But I'll bop him one if he tries, okay?"

Macro strutted towards his room with Anchor's paw on his back. The granbull didn't relinquish his grip until they reached the mawile's door. There, he turned him to face him and his large muzzle was set in a concerned frown.

"Did you really see all that?" he asked. "Or were you pullin' our legs?"

Macro scratched his scar and looked away from him. That sun… it looked every bit like those dazzle spots. He hadn't realised it straight away. And that dazzle was still on his vision, although not as bright.

"Where'd that flash come from?" he asked Anchor. "The one that blinded me in the cockpit?"

"What flash?" Anchor asked.

Macro felt his heart sink. So no one had seen the flash or the numbers and symbol? "It went off right when you were testing the

turrets."

Anchor shook his head then sighed. "I really think you need some rest."

"This has been happening a lot lately, Anchor." Macro spread his paws. "I fall asleep then something blinds me and I see this sun symbol. Now I'm seeing flashes while I'm awake and stuff no one else can see?"

Anchor's eyes widened. "How long has this been going on?"

"I don't know, a few days?"

"I think you might need to see a doctor."

"I ain't seeing a doctor. Not yet, anyway. Since those co-ordinates worked…"

Anchor scratched his mohawk and looked away from him. "Gonna be honest, Cap'n. That might've been a glitch."

"I don't know," said Macro. "But if they actually work, I might get some answers."

Anchor fixed him out of the corner of his eye. "You really think they might work?"

Macro shrugged. "No idea. Let's find out. Staple Matrix's arms to his sides if he tries to change them."

Anchor chuckled and gave a salute. "You got it, Cap'n. Now get some sleep."

…

The outskirts of System Sky were completely devoid of life. If it weren't for the porygon-z fleet drifting back and forth, BackDoor would have found it peaceful. He floated in the air with his arms

tucked behind his head, reclining backwards as he watched the fleet work.

A small group of them stood aside, rotating their heads back and forth as they eyed the dimensional pocket to the 'unknown world'. Getting close to them would be nigh impossible. They'd already thrown a tantrum upon his arrival, worse than he was familiar with. Something about them seemed very amiss.

Their movements were more erratic. What passed off as 'limbs' rocked back and forth dramatically, the gravitational pull almost throwing them completely backwards when they came to a stop. Then throwing them forwards again when they started moving. The strange, dramatic rocking reminded him of one of those bobbing bird toys that tipped into a glass as though it were drinking. But unlike those birds, their heads span. Sometimes doing a complete three-sixty.

BackDoor tutted. He needed to get closer to that dimensional pocket and tear it open, then he could get as far away from the fleet as possible. The only issue was that it might come at the expense of his own limbs.

He sat up and gave TimeSkip a nudge. "You wanna go over there and lure them away?"

The celebi looked around silently, not absorbing a word he said.

BackDoor sighed and drifted higher into the air. "Fine. I'll do it. But if they try to blow me up, I'm using you as a meat shield."

As he floated towards Zero Day, TimeSkip followed close behind him. BackDoor rolled his eyes but kept his attention on the fleet. One wrong movement (from their perspective at least) would see him reduced to scraps.

"All right, back up, Zero Day," he said. "Let me open that gate."

One of the passing porygon-z span its head around and its pupils retracted into pin pricks.

'Thr34T d3T3cT3d! Thr34T d3T3cT3d!'

Their already distorted voices seemed to have exaggerated as much as their movements.

"Calm down!" BackDoor snapped.

The rest of the porygon-z followed suit, their heads spinning freely above their bodies as their distorted voices joined in.

The hoopa sighed and faltered slightly just outside the fleet. Then he threw himself through the air and warped beyond them. Twenty eyes snapped onto him, pupils like dots.

'R3m0vInG Thr34T. C0mm3Nsssss3 CL34NuP.'

Before BackDoor could retaliate, beams of tri-coloured light shot at him. He threw himself backwards into a warp and sent himself back to TimeSkip's side. The hoopa's face twisted with rage and he removed the ring from his right horn. With one swift flick of a paw, the ring expanded above Zero Day, warping them away several feet. They span on the spot before looking back at him and moving slowly away across System Sky.

"Morons!" BackDoor spat.

The sheer limit of his abilities ground in his gut. If he'd been given Hoopa's alleged full capabilities, he could have sent them outside System's galaxy. He let out a low growl and span towards TimeSkip, his lips curling into a snarl.

He waved a paw, distorting time and space. Small, black voids appeared and vanished quickly around the android's body, dragging its limbs through them and twisting them into knots. A flash of light

exploded from cracks along its metal body, reducing it to scraps that rained down into the ocean below.

"There." BackDoor beat his paws together and looked back at the spot the fleet had previously occupied. "That feels much better."

He drifted over to the dimensional pocket and eyed it curiously. Another world. 'World - Unknown'. Curiosity gnawed at him and he removed one of his golden rings. He just had to see what was inside. Not just because he'd been made merely to find a new System, but because of that creature. What if there were more?

He span in a circle, tracing a perfect ring in the air. It glowed with a yellow light and spread out, filling the inside with an ultraviolet mist. A grin spread across his face and he waited, keeping himself a safe distance from the portal. Through the ultraviolet mist he could see it perfectly. A world filled with strange flora. Glowing mushrooms, rocks that leaked out eerie light. A permanently dark sky lit up by a vibrant moon. And something moving. No… not something. Things.

They were growing closer. All tentacles and billowing heads. More of those beasts! And they were coming right at him.

He clapped his paws together and laughed, performing a backwards somersault. Tinkling voices reached his ears and one by one the beasts were launched through the gate. The first one paused, spreading out its tentacles as it took in its new world. Its companions joined behind it, looking equally as dazed. Then the first one launched itself towards BackDoor.

The hoopa span out of the way and raised his paws.

"Oi! Don't attack me, I'm your new master!"

The beasts tinkled at him, turning what he guessed were their heads to seek him out. How? They had no eyes to speak of. Wow, these things were intriguing.

More came through the gate, some big, some small. But one of them looked vastly different. It landed amid the others with much less grace. It seemed bouncy, and colourful. The same shaped head, but filled with what he could only describe as candy sprinkles.

Its body was lanky and lacked tentacles. Instead it appeared to have limbs. More colourful splodges adorned its body. It was as though the ultra beasts had absorbed a Mr Mime, turning it into one of their own.

BackDoor laughed hysterically. So the tentacled beasts weren't the only anomalies the gates could reveal?

The creatures gathered themselves and headed down towards System Ground, their tinkling voices reaching out to each other. Guiding each other as they worked their way through the world. The odd bouncy ultra beast didn't follow after them. It turned to look at BackDoor, then took off like a dart over his head.

"That's right!" BackDoor laughed. "Enjoy this world! Do as you please! We won't be staying here long anyway!"

He clapped his paws and turned back to the gate. Leave it open? Or close it? The atmosphere inside was completely useless to Socket. An eternal night would drive pokemon to the brink of insanity.

He inclined his head on one side and stroked his chin thoughtfully. Then, with a drawn out 'naah', he zipped it shut.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 45

A/N - Sorry this chapter is a little late. We were away over the weekend and didn't find time to update on the Friday. Updates should go back to normal from this Friday.

Chapter Forty Five

The Bricked Inn squatted between two tall buildings along Fuchsia Avenue. One could have easily overlooked it if it weren't for the old, wooden sign creaking in the artificial breeze.

Annie had insisted on checking out Moonlight Lounge first, which her friends implored desperately against. And not just because of the price, it seemed. After Annie had terrorized about a hundred different space pirates using only her presence alone, Trojan had dragged her out by her collar, muttering something about 'jackin' humans being jackin' impossible' before he finally released her in a narrow alleyway.

Annie pushed the old door to the Bricked Inn open, and a tinny sound rang out over her head. She ducked and skittered into the room, wafting at whatever it was that had made the intrusive sound. An ancient wind chime hung over the door. A tiny starly swinging back and forth between four hollow tubes, striking each one with a metal ball.

"Calm yer ass," Trojan muttered as he pushed past her towards the desk. "Don't you think you've terrorized enough 'mon today?"

Annie stood up straight and beat down her blouse. Web caught her eye and raised an eyebrow before following the scrafty into the lobby.

A dark-furred meowth sat behind the desk, her entire body trembling. Her whiskers quivered as she stared wide-mouthed at the human.

Annie stared back at her and inclined her head on one side. The feline seemed to be about to faint.

"Don't worry 'bout her," Trojan told the meowth. "She's with us."

"What…" the meowth gasped out. "What…"

"I said don't worry 'bout her!" the scrafty snapped. "Can we book two rooms, or not?"

The meowth reached under the desk, not taking her eyes off Annie, and pulled out a tattered folder. Even as she opened it, her wide eyes remained on the human.

Trojan tapped the desk with his claws, loud enough to drag the meowth's terrified eyes onto him.

"S-sorry," she sputtered. "I'll… I'll just check."

Annie felt a wing flop onto her shoulders and she tore her attention from the quaking meowth. Waveform stood beside her, keeping a close eye on the receptionist.

"They'll get used to you," he said quietly.

Annie shrugged, causing Waveform to remove his wing. "I'm not bothered if they get used to me. I'm going home anyway, once I get my hands on that Time Onion."

Waveform's eyes widened slightly and he turned back to the receptionist. "Well, I'm sure we'll find it. We just need to know where to look."

"We're still starting a rebellion, right?" Zip's small voice rose up from her right.

She looked down at the glass bowl containing the goldeen. Those stitches still looked very red and sore but they didn't seem to bother him at all. His tiny eyes sparkled, almost pleading.

Annie simply shrugged. "Sure. Why not. Gotta stop these weirdos eating themselves, right?"

Waveform's paw fell over her shoulder and he let out a sharp 'shh!', giving her a violent jerk. Annie let out a yelp as she fell sideways into the decidueye.

Zip's laughter at her clumsiness lifted any suspicion from them, despite the fact the meowth was still as tense as a bow string about to snap. Trojan rolled his eyes at them and returned to whatever it was he was doing. Where had he got that pen from?

He slammed it down onto the counter and the meowth took it, hiding it away under the desk along with the folder. She then turned her back on them, glancing over her shoulder occasionally to look at Annie. The meowth pulled over a stool and climbed onto it to reach a cork-board full of… keyrings?… behind her.

"Here are your keys," she told Trojan. "Don't lose them, or it'll be fifty credits each."

Trojan snorted and tucked them into his baggy fur.

"Your rooms are on the second floor," said the receptionist. "Check out is at noon."

He waved a paw at her then gestured for Annie and the other pokemon to follow him.

Waveform ushered Annie ahead of him, all the while keeping an eye on the receptionist. Annie wanted to ask him what his problem was. What had the meowth done to deserve being stared at like that? Nevertheless, she forgot all about it as she climbed the stairs to the second floor.

Trojan was already stood outside one of the rooms, twirling the keyring-like key-thing in his claws.

"They're opposite each other," he said with a nod to the opposite room. "Made sure we weren't split up. Here's your key." He handed the one he was twirling to Annie then narrowed his eyes. "Don't lose it 'cos I ain't payin' for it."

Annie frowned down at the black lump of plastic. "It looks like something you'd use to lock a car."

All four pokemon fixed her with equal looks of confusion. She looked up at them and glanced at each one in turn.

"What?" she asked. "You never seen a car before?"

"We aren't that retro," said Zip.

Trojan nodded at the fish. "What he said. Now, get in your room and get some sleep."

The scrafty flashed his key fob at a panel beneath the door handle and it let out an audible click. He turned the handle and tried to push it open. The catch caught in the frame and he muttered under his breath, using his shoulder to barge the door open. The wood splintered slightly around the catch, but it eventually swung inward, revealing a room that looked like it hadn't been slept in in decades.

"So I guess I'm sharing with Web?" Annie turned to her room. "I hope she doesn't snore."

"You ain't sharin' with Web," said Trojan. "You're with Zip and Waveform."

The scrafty waved a paw at the skuntank and she gave Annie a shake of the head as she followed him into the room.

Annie raised an eyebrow. "What's that about?"

Waveform took her key fob and opened the door. It opened a lot smoother than Trojan's had, but the room was in an equal state of sadness.

"They're married," he told her.

Annie looked up at him with a start.

"You didn't know?" he asked.

"Hadn't a clue." She retrieved the fob and ducked under his wing to enter the room. "They bicker like-"

"Like an old, married couple?" Waveform chuckled, which Annie thought was rather uncharacteristic. "They've been married for about ten years now. That's why Web gave up being a space pirate. She wanted to stay on System Ground."

Annie sat on the edge of the bed. "Why didn't Trojan just join her as a space pirate?"

"His job." Waveform leant against the door frame, inching aside as Zip scurried past him. "He didn't want to leave his bar."

"Yeh, and that went to pot." Annie yawned and stretched, flopping backwards onto the musty sheets. "This room is gonna give me a headache."

The decidueye strolled across the room towards the lone, pokey window. He hoisted up the blind and shoved the window open. Fresh air rushed into the room, clearing up the musty air like an obsession.

Annie finally looked around the room. One bed. Single. One dressing table. Grey with dust and falling to bits. One chair. Three legs, the other lying against the wall. A crimson rug. Threadbare.

"Who gets the bed?" she asked.

Waveform turned and leant against the wall, searching the room with his scarlet eyes.

"I don't need a bed," said Zip from beside the dressing table. "So I'm fine here."

Waveform turned to look at Annie then kicked himself back from the wall. "You take it. I'm going out for a while."

Annie watched him as he marched across the room towards the door. "Where to?"

"I need to pick up a few things." He placed his paw on the handle and gave her a nod. "Don't worry. I'll be back before dawn."

Annie yawned widely and let herself flop back onto the bed. "All right. But I can't guarantee the bed will be free."

He said nothing. She didn't even hear him move from the room. The only thing that truly betrayed his exit was the click as the door locked itself behind him.

…

Tracer poked his head out of the narrow alley, watching the decidueye cross the street. The owl didn't even look around him at the other space pirates. A black scarf was fastened securely behind his head and covered his silver-clad beak, making his crimson eyes stand out even more.

Clever. Quite clever.

Waveform had taken a huge risk coming to Pulse City and he knew it. A bounty hunter like himself would be a prime target and space pirates wouldn't bat an eyelid at giving him a hard time. They might even have resorted to killing him. The scarf coupled with the lack of his silver quiver and arrows would remove suspicion from most, if not all, of the space pirates.

Tracer warred with the desire to follow the decidueye and to stay true to his job. His curiosity was getting the better of him. Why on earth would Waveform so brazenly enter Pulse City with his reputation?

Widget shifted beside him as he poked his head out around Tracer's knee, dragging the delphox right back into reality. He became uncomfortably aware of the incineroar stood behind him, leaning back against the damp wall. Not remotely watching the events unfolding. Good. If he'd noticed Tracer's interest he'd have pushed him for information on the decidueye's identity. Tracer had already told the space pirate enough as it was.

So long as that never got back to Socket, he didn't have to worry.

"What you waitin' around for, fuzzy?" N0ize's voice sent a chill down Tracer's spine.

He looked back over his shoulder at the space pirate, meeting his eye.

"I think the coast might be clear," said Tracer. "I was just waiting for her friend to leave."

"Y'ain't followin' him?"

Tracer shook his head. "It's not him I'm after."

"Fair enough," said N0ize. "But you might've been able to punch him for information."

"I think you mean 'pump him'," said Widget.

N0ize laughed heartily. "I really don't, kid. I want information and someone ain't willin' to give it, I punch 'em up."

Tracer wanted to reply with an 'I can believe it' but decided he much preferred his spine intact. Instead he nodded for the incineroar to follow him and slipped around the corner, hugging tightly to the wall.

Widget, however, marched boldly down the street to the Bricked Inn, then vanished inside.

"Kid's got guts," said N0ize, somewhat impressed. "Way more guts than you."

"I sometimes worry he has more guts than any sane pokemon should have." Tracer shook his head and waved a paw at the open door. "Let's just follow him inside."

Widget stood on his hind legs, leaning his forepaws on the reception desk. Only his nose poked over, but he spoke confidently to the dark furred meowth. The meowth squinted down at him, having to stand on her chair to see him clearly.

Dark fur. One of the several changes a paw-full of pokemon had undergone when the types split. A result of a lack of steady sunshine and a drastic change in career path had resulted in the meowth being more suited to night time excursions. Tracer hadn't seen one on System Ground, but finding one in Pulse City didn't remotely surprise him.

"So if you could tell us where she is," said Widget, "I'd be very grateful."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," said the meowth. "It's my policy."

"How about I pay you?" Widget went on. "Five thousand credits."

The meowth's eyes almost spun in her sockets. Tracer even thought he saw the charm flash on her forehead, but it was more likely the light from a well-timed laser fire outside. Her lips curled into a smile and she chuckled as she fell back into her seat.

"You know how to spin a bargain," she said. "Make it seven thousand and I'll even give you a key to her room."

Widget looked like he was about to reply, but Tracer placed a paw on his shoulder and made him back down.

"I don't think that's necessary," the delphox said around his cigar. "I'm sure she'll let us in."

"You sure about that?" The meowth smirked. "You don't look like space pirates." She then looked up at N0ize and her smirk faltered. "He does. But you two? Not even in the slightest."

"Hey!" Widget protested. "I like to think I look more like a space pirate than my friend here."

"Which one?" the meowth asked. "The delphox? Sure."

Tracer removed his cigar and toyed with the urge to flick ash onto the floor. It went against everything he believed in, but if he went outside to do it that would only solidify the meowth's accusations. So he flicked it right onto her desk.

"I think you have us wrong," he told her. "Now kindly tell us where we can find this strange creature who's taken a room here."

N0ize chuckled and stepped up beside him, ramming his fist into his open paw. The meowth cowered behind her desk and did her best to disguise it by pulling out a tattered folder.

She didn't even need to open it. She spewed out the room number before she even got to the page, then tossed a key fob right at N0ize.

The incineroar caught it and twirled it around his claw. "Thank ye kindly."

The malicious note in his voice pushed Tracer's fur on end, making him oddly grateful for his long coat. They left the lobby and followed the meowth's fractured directions towards the stairs.

"That was fun," said Widget. "We should do this more often."

"I am not becoming a space pirate," Tracer muttered under his breath. "I think you need to get your priorities straight."

"Keep talkin' like that," said N0ize icily, "and you'll find yourself shaved and tremblin' in a gutter."

The delphox gulped as quietly as he could and trotted silently after Widget. The eevee found the room before they did and stood sniffing at the floor.

"I think this is the one," he said. "Smells like a skuntank rolled around on the floor."

Tracer puffed on his cigar as he eyed the door. It was definitely the right room. The faded numbers on the wood showed where the metal plates used to hang, until someone decided they'd rather steal them and melt them down into something else. He lifted his paw and knocked rapidly.

Someone moved around inside, their feet clattering over the wooden floor. Something scraped against the door as though someone was desperate to claw their way out.

"Argh, I can't do it," a young voice said. More clattering. "Annie! Annie, someone's at the door."

Mumbles. Heavy footsteps.

The door creaked open and the contrast of long, black fur around a pale, bald face stared back at them. She rubbed a hand over her green eyes and frowned.

"I know you," she said. "You're that fox. What are you doing here? Waitaminute… Are you a clone?!" She looked left and right frantically and backed into her room.

"I can assure you I'm not a clone," said Tracer. "I'm here because I need to talk to you."

"You ain't talkin' to me," she said. "I don't talk to strangers."

N0ize stepped closer to Tracer, towering over him as he smacked his paws together.

Annie stared up at him and her green eyes widened. "That's a pretty big pussy cat."

"What's going on here?"

The voice came from behind Tracer. He turned but struggled to see past N0ize. He caught a glimpse of purple fur and a fluffy tail spread out over a skuntank's back.

"We're just here to talk to the girl," said N0ize. "Nothin' you need to concern yerself over. Wait… I know you. You're Webber!"

Web tutted. "I was hoping you'd have forgotten by now, you big lout. What are you doing hanging around with a couple of detectives? You changed sides?"

"Hey, I'm just a curious bystander." N0ize turned back to Annie and grinned at the amusement on her face. "Listen here. You're gonna talk to these fuzzies, and I'm gonna listen. You understand?"

"I don't think so." This voice was male, and a familiar scrafty stood behind Web, his paws tucked into his baggy fur. "You ain't makin' her talk. You'll turn her over to the jackin' mayor!"

"I don't have jack to do with the mayor!" N0ize roared. "I just wanna know why some lanky, bald creature is livin' in System."

"I think we all do," said Web.

"Oi!"

Annie dragged all their eyes back to her. She stood with her arms crossed and her lips pulled down into a perfect frown.

"I have you know I don't like being called 'bald'," she said. "Lanky, sure. But not bald. Nor just 'creature'. I'm a human, okay. Well…

now, anyway. But when I'm a human, it's 'human'. And when I'm an archeops, it's 'archeops'. All right? Not 'creature'. Not 'bald thing'. Not 'weirdo'-"

"We've never called you 'weird', dear," said Web softly.

"I heard him do it." Annie pointed at Trojan.

The scrafty shrugged at Web's disapproving frown. "I was tired and grumpy."

"You're always tired and grumpy," said the skuntank.

"Now," said Annie firmly. "If it'll get Mister Fox off my back, I'll tell him whatever he needs to know. But I can tell you one thing for certain."

She stopped, making Tracer's fur bristle. He removed his cigar and met her eyes dead on.

"And what's that?" he asked.

She frowned. "I ain't ever goin' back to that mad mayor. She ain't putting me in no lab. Capiche?"

Tracer puffed on his cigar, fixing his amber eyes on hers. A mixture of craziness, fear and anger stared back at him. This wasn't a creature he wanted to mess with, that was for sure.

N0ize looked between the two and a loud laugh came from deep within his chest. "A lab?! So the mayor's experimentin' on living things now? Man, somethin' makes me think I'm gonna love this."

…

When Macro woke up, it was dark. He rubbed a paw over his eyes and let out a long groan as he pushed the sheets off himself. The idea of staying in bed until the sun rose fluttered through his mind and he briefly considered lying back down and going back to sleep. Then he remembered those co-ordinates.

His eyes snapped open, all sleepy fog expelled from his mind with the force of a typhoon.

No, he couldn't go back to sleep. He had to find out if those co-ordinates were working, and if so, where exactly they were taking them.

He slipped from his bed and made for the door, being sure to grab his scarf and goggles on the way. His scarf was still damp, but he didn't care. Light flooded the corridor as he stepped outside, the automatic signal triggering as it detected him.

No one was awake?

He'd never been up so early before. Matrix often put the ship into auto-pilot, but surely the ribombee would want to know if the co-ordinates were legitimate?

Macro cautiously entered the cockpit, his nerves getting the better of him. The ship felt barren, and not a single member of his crew was awake. What time was it? He glanced at the navigation screen, first checking the time.

Two in the morning.

His heart sank and he warred with the desire to return to bed. But first, he needed to check where they were.

Navigation systems were alien to him. All he really knew was that the green dot was his own ship, while red ones usually meant trouble. Large splodges indicating cities scattered over the screen, their names clearly marked. The fainter ones were System Ground, and most of them were behind them now, leaving nothing but a stretch of sea and the Analogue Isles far to their right. Only two of System Sky's islands could be seen, one of which they'd just passed. He didn't care to check the name. He was too bothered that the co-ordinates were taking them well out of System's boundaries. Across the ocean. The vast ocean that seemed to have no end. Towards a

block of coldness that would freeze the ship's fuel and then send them to an icy death.

Macro hugged himself as he watched the green dot travel over the blackness. Sure, they'd gone outside System's boundaries before. That's how they'd found DL. But something felt different this time.

He pushed himself from the navigation system and turned towards the window.

Blackness. Blackness dotted by stars.

Not a city in sight.

Wildcard Gamma's own lights lit up ahead of them, revealing nothing. It all felt so empty.

Macro pinched his upper arm tightly then stifled a yelp. Nope. He was definitely awake. He absently paced towards his chair and placed one paw on the back of it, searching the nothingness.

Wait… Something was on the horizon.

He squinted into the darkness, wondering if it were his imagination. But Wildcard Gamma's lights danced over something far ahead of them. Whatever it was, it was moving. No… they were moving. Back and forth, like bright specks in the dregs of black coffee. He leant forwards, holding himself steady against his seat. They grew gradually clearer as Wildcard Gamma encroached upon them. Their forms becoming more defined. They appeared to be pokemon, but pokemon couldn't fly freely in System Sky. The air was too thin, and too cold. They'd die of suffocation if the cold didn't kill them first.

One of them rotated its head, looking straight at Wildcard Gamma. Then it froze. The others froze beside it, their limbs flailing with… with what? Were they flying? No… it was irritation. Whatever they were, they weren't happy to see them.

Then it hit him. They weren't pokemon at all. They were androids. Hundreds of them. All designed to look like the tried and failed Porygon Z.

And they were not happy to see him.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 46

Chapter Forty Six

The blaring siren wailed through Wildcard Gamma, slicing through the silence like a machete. Macro scrambled over the controls on the dashboard, first turning off the ship's headlights. But doing that meant they could no longer see the porygon z. Muttering under his breath, he flicked the lights back on and resigned himself to dimming them.

When he looked back up at the robotic army, his heart almost stopped. They'd gathered themselves together, forming a formidable angry wall. All eyes were on the ship. Hundreds of eyes. Their legs rotated back and forth, causing them to rock, but their eyes never left Wildcard Gamma. If Macro didn't know any better, he'd say they were looking right at him.

"What's with the racket?" Anchor's voice startled Macro so much he squeaked. "Sorry, Cap'n."

The granbull fell into his seat and yawned, his jaw popping loudly. Usually it would have made Macro grimace, but right now he had bigger things to worry about.

"We've run into some trouble," he told Anchor. "Got a load of porygon z blocking our path."

"A load of what?" Anchor's mouth was open but it was Matrix who'd spoken.

Macro looked over his shoulder to see the ribombee at his desk, winding his antenna in one paw while the other scrolled over the navigation screen. He didn't even bother to look up at Macro.

"Porygon z," Macro repeated. "At least that's what they look like. We're not all that close."

Anchor leant over the dashboard to squint at the mass of robots. They were a lot closer to the ship now than before Macro set off the alarm. Clearer, almost unmistakable if his memory served. But a second opinion might clear away any doubts he had.

"Certainly look like them from photos I've seen," said Anchor.

Macro rolled his eyes and fell back into his seat with a groan. "Do you think this has anything to do with BackDoor?"

"I dunno. Might just be a new government fleet design." Anchor shrugged. "What do you suggest we do about it?"

"Those co-ordinates are leading us right through it," said Matrix. "We could always dodge them?"

"Do that," said Macro. "They're giving me the creeps."

Anchor mumbled his acknowledgement and steered the ship sharply to the left. Macro watched the porygon z drift out of Wildcard Gamma's field and a grin spread across his face. It was that easy. All they had to do was-

One by one the porygon z shot through the sky, then slowed as they kept pace with the ship's movements. All eyes still on them. Bodies rocking back and forth.

Macro's grin fell into a distressed frown. "You're kidding me?"

Anchor let his paw fall from the steering stick and turned to face his captain. "I can fire at them if you'd like?"

"What if they fire back?" Matrix asked. "There are way more of them than there are of us."

Macro nibbled on a claw as he stared out at the imposing army. Fire… it was such a simple solution, but what if they could attack back?

A white paw appeared on the arm of his chair and he looked down at DL as she stared out of the window. She wasn't wearing her scarf or her belt.

"That's Zero Day," she said.

Macro dropped his paw into his lap. "What?"

"Zero Day," she said. "They're part of the BackDoor network."

He looked from her to the porygon z. So they were part of BackDoor. They weren't government ships. Somehow that made them even more terrifying.

"Do you know what they do exactly?" Macro asked.

DL's eyes went distant as she searched her recently unlocked database. "They're made to search for pockets in time and space. Their main goal is to find a suitable world where Socket can build a new System, but they're not able to open them. That's BackDoor's job."

"And BackDoor is…?" Macro nodded to the fleet.

DL shook her head. "BackDoor is one single entity, but its identity is unknown. They've kept it out of the database." She looked back out at the porygon z and swallowed audibly. "Zero Day is meant to be spread out across System Sky, not grouped together like this. I'm not sure what's going on."

If DL thought their behavior was strange then something was definitely amiss. Macro's mouth turned dry and his claw found its way back to his mouth.

"Can these things attack us?" he asked.

"Yes," said DL. "All androids are equipped with their own self defense mechanisms, except for TimeSkip. TimeSkip had only one

job to fulfill, and was made with haste. But BackDoor and Zero Day are all able to attack."

"And what attack does Zero Day use?"

"They're equipped with the facilities to emulate 'tri attack'."

Macro closed his eyes and sank even further into his seat. "We're all gonna die."

"Don't be a martyr, Cap'n!" Anchor rammed his paw into the dashboard, startling Macro out of his rain cloud. "We can get through this, we just need a plan!"

A plan…

Macro sat up straight again, keeping his claw fastened between his teeth. Zero Day was still ahead of them, spread out like a barrier. All eyes locked on Wildcard Gamma. If the ship got any closer, they'd inevitably attack. He needed to work out their range and stay out of it. Hopefully the schooling cannons could reach further than Zero Day's tri attack.

"Attack them," said Macro. "Engage schooling."

"Roger," said Anchor.

The cannons whirred into place, the familiar sound settling Macro's nerves. Bubbles spiralled out ahead of them towards the porygon z. Their heads snapped towards the bubbles, rotating back and forth as they tried to organize themselves. Then they fired. Bubbles exploded several feet from the porgyon z. Every single bubble, picked off by each individual android. When they got within range, they were detonated, the impact blowing the fleet back slightly. But no sooner had they been blown back, they sped back into formation and picked off the next threat. The cannons settled down, and once the last bubble had been dealt with, all lifeless eyes snapped back towards Wildcard Gamma.

Macro silently gnawed on his claw as he stared back at Zero Day, his mind playing back their strategy.

"Well, that was fairly pointless," said Anchor.

"No it wasn't." Macro lowered his paw. "They could only target the bombs that were close enough. I'd say they have a range of about sixteen feet."

Anchor turned his head to look at him. "That's not much different than our range."

"No." Macro returned to his gnawing. "We're gonna have to be sly about this. Try to reel back after we've fired."

"Zero Day aren't all that intelligent," said DL, "but they are equipped with basic battle strategies. I wouldn't underestimate them."

"Then what do you suggest we do?" Macro asked her.

DL tapped her claws on his arm rest as her eyes went distant once more. Then she shook her head.

"I have no idea," she said. "You've got more experience with aerial combat than I have."

Macro scratched beneath his goggles and sighed. "My idea is get close enough, fire, then double back. Anyone have any better ideas?"

Mumbles filled the cockpit and the rest of his crew shook their heads.

"So… we're goin' with my idea?" Macro turned back to the window and sighed. "All right. Make sure our shields are up and advance."

Wildcard Gamma slowly drew closer to Zero Day. With each foot covered, the porygon z grew more and more agitated, their limbs flailing and eyes spinning. DL clambered up into Macro's seat and he shuffled aside for her as she settled into place and fastened the

seatbelt over them both. It was a good idea. With the imminent barrage of attacks they were about to receive, he was taking no chances.

Zero Day grew larger and more imposing. Macro could see the fine details of their eyes. Tiny pupils contracted into pin pricks in an ocean of yellow and orange rings. Their heads bobbed back and forth, independent from their bodies. Even their limbs weren't attached, spread out around their bodies and held in place by some invisible force.

A small number of them broke away from the group and their eyes flashed, sending out a tri-coloured beam of light.

"Fire!" Macro barked.

The turrets whirred and clanked noisily, and another spiral beam of bubbles fired out at a rapid pace towards Zero Day. Two of the bombs met their attacks, but the remaining beams struck the ship with such force Macro fell sideways into DL.

He mumbled an apology and pushed himself back up, catching her unconsciously smooth out her fur. A distressed look spread across her face and he followed her gaze back to the window.

Zero Day had separated into three groups in a bid to dodge the exploding bubbles. The remaining bombs exploded, catching the stragglers and blowing them back. Several of the porygon z fell from the air, plummeting down towards the ocean.

"Well, we took some of them out," said Anchor.

Macro barely processed his words as he watched the three groups Zero Day had formed zip away from each other. Two of them drifted around either side of the ship, their eyes locked on it, while the third group bobbed backwards through the darkness.

"I think they're taking evasive manoeuvres." Matrix wound his antenna loosely around his paw as he watched the events unfold. "I'd brace ourselves for-"

The ribombee flew from his seat as Wildcard Gamma shook violently. Zero Day launched a barrage of attacks at either side of the ship, chipping away at its precious shield.

"Move it!" Macro roared, diving across the dashboard for the steering stick.

Anchor swatted him away like a flea and the mawile crumpled to the floor.

"Sorry, Cap'n," Anchor said flatly. "But if you take over, we're dead."

Macro rubbed his head, feeling a slight bump from his collision with the floor. Muttering under his breath, he returned to his seat. A look of pity washed over DL's face and she watched him out of the corner of his eye as he tried to slide back under the seat belt.

Anchor steered Wildcard Gamma up and away from Zero Day. Macro was forced back into his seat as the schooling wishiwashi rose higher into the sky, then it turned on a pivot to nose dive back towards Zero Day. Bubbles flew ahead of it, exploding as they struck the third porygon group. More of the deranged androids fell towards the ocean while the group split into two and went off in opposite directions. Something appeared before the ship. Black and uninviting.

Macro's stomach flipped nauseatingly. "Back away, Anchor! That's one of them porthole things!"

Anchor threw himself back into his seat, steering Wildcard Gamma back up and away from the porthole.

"That's not right!" DL gasped. "Zero Day aren't meant to be able to open pockets like that!"

Macro snapped his head around to face her. His mouth opened, but he couldn't find words.

"That's BackDoor's job," said DL, answering his unasked question. "Zero Day are only meant to find them. How have they… when…?"

Vibrations rocked the ship and Zero Day zipped ahead of them on either side, their tri-coloured lasers streaming from their faces reminiscent of a dazzling light display.

Bubbles met lasers. Lasers met bubbles. It was a constant back and forth as Wildcard Gamma struggled to get through the onslaught.

Porygon z after porygon z fell towards the ocean, but the ones they'd taken down were replaced just as quickly as more flew in from the separated groups. Tri-attacks hit the ship's tail, spinning it almost ninety degrees. Bubbles flew around it, not firing out far enough and catching the ship in the blast's aftermath.

Macro grit his teeth together and dragged his claws down his face. "We're gonna have to bail!"

"We're not gonna have to bail!" Anchor roared. "Just calm your mudbrays and let's think of another plan!"

"My 'other plan' is to bail!" Macro snapped. "We're getting our tails whupped!"

Anchor's muzzle creased, revealing one of his canines, but he said nothing. Wildcard Gamma twisted out of the way of one of the porygon's next attacks and found itself receiving another tri-attack right to the nose. Macro flinched back from it, the light dazzling his vision. When he opened his eyes, a fine crack had spread across the glass like a cobweb.

For the first time in many years, Macro actually felt overwhelmed. He wanted to run. Grab the neon ladder and drop towards the ocean. He'd worry about what to do next once he was there.

"I can hear them."

He snapped his head around towards DL. Her chocolate eyes were wide and frantic, almost crazed.

"What?" he gasped. His heart was racing, and he looked between her and Zero Day.

"I can hear them," she said. "So many voices. They're terrified. They want us to leave."

"Terrified?" Anchor snorted and cast her a sideways glance before setting off another stream of explosives. "They're robots!"

"Well they're terrified!" she snapped. "I can hear them, and I can't stand it!"

"What are they saying?" Macro asked.

"It's hard to make out," she explained. "But they're treating you like a computer virus and trying to eradicate you. They keep calling you a threat, and throwing themselves into a panic."

"So basically they're acting like antibodies?"

"In a sense, yes." DL's paw clutched around the seatbelt until her knuckles turned white. "They're trying everything. Everything. How on earth have they discovered how to open pockets?"

Zero Day broke apart once more, leaving only a few to fire at Wildcard Gamma. It looked at first like the ones leaving the group were heading towards the ship's tail, but instead they hovered in the air, their heads spinning crazily.

Several black voids opened above the ship and it trembled as each one emitted its own forcefield. The entire ship shuddered as each porthole tried to suck it into its void.

"They're trying to break us apart!" Anchor barked.

Macro stuttered over his words as he scrambled to get out from his seatbelt. "Get… get us away!"

"I'm trying!"

"Guys?" Matrix's voice was uncharacteristically wobbly. "Something's coming right at us, and it's big."

The ship surged, plummeting towards the ocean. Macro's stomach shot into his throat, left somewhere above them. Then the ship levelled out, outside the pockets' reach. Zero Day hovered above them, their eyes trained on the ship. What Macro could see of them, anyway. They didn't move towards them, or move away. They just sat… watching.

Macro opened his mouth to ask what had just happened, but his words came out in a strangled scream. His eyes were fixed on the windshield as a long shadow appeared outside it. A smile in a face with no eyes. Long, leathery hide billowed around it, trailing over the glass. A slender neck that looked almost skeletal or plant like.

Its mouth opened and a long, wailing scream flew from its throat. Macro's own scream died before it left his mouth. He felt all consciousness leave his body. The last thing he remembered was something warm embracing him, and the sensation of Wildcard Gamma dropping from the sky like a stunned swanna.

…

The police station cafeteria was bustling. Voices filled the room, each one competing to be heard over the rest. Few batted an eyelid at the human limping through, a small tray clasped in his hands. One or two threw a hello or a grin in his direction, but most of them were more occupied with the contents of their plates or worried they might miss out on a joke.

Floppy looked up from his burger and gave Switch a nod. "You're lookin' well."

The vaporeon was sat with Jumper and Heatsink. He eagerly tapped the table beside him with a paw and grinned.

Switch fell onto a stool a bit too low down for his liking. It jarred his body slightly and he released his tray to the table with a clatter in favour of rubbing his ribs.

The frogadier raised an eyebrow. "I think you spoke too soon, Floppy."

"Nah!" the vaporeon shook his head and waved a paw at Switch. "He's fine!"

"I really am fine," said Switch. "Just a little sore still."

"I still think they discharged you too early," said Jumper. "If you'd like, I can get back on at them again?"

"No need." Switch took a huge bite out of his burger. "I'll be flying again before you know it."

Jumper's brows knit together in a frown. "You talk as though injuring yourself is a common occurrence."

"It certainly isn't a common occurrence," said Switch. "But I'm beginning to think it is in this time line. I mean, I've been nearly crushed by two huge pokemon and I've only been here a week!"

"Well." Jumper dabbed at his lips with a napkin. "After lunch, you head back to my apartment and rest. It's no good pushing yourself when your bones are still healing."

"If you say so." Switch sighed and let his hand fall back onto his plate, spilling tamato slices out of his burger. "Man, I just want to get back out there. I wonder what Macro's doing?"

Floppy looked up with a start. "He's still not contacted you?"

"No. I can't believe he just took off without me."

"That's how he treats his 'clients'?" Floppy flashed his canines. "I oughta show him a thing or two."

"That'll be enough, Floppy," said Heatsink. "I believe Macro had Switch's best interests. He's safe here."

"Aye." Floppy sank to the table until his head was between both paws. "Fine, I'll shut up."

"I know you said you didn't want to call him yourself," said Jumper. "But you do have his number. I made sure of that."

"I know," said Switch. "But he could just as easily ring me." He gave Jumper a wink and the frogadier rolled his eyes.

"You're both as stubborn as each other," said Jumper.

"But you all have a good point," said Switch, ignoring his remark. "Once I can fly I'll track him down, give him a firm word, most likely receive one back, and get back to finding a way back home."

"Well." Jumper looked up at him a little sadly. "Until then, you're very welcome to keep helping out around here."

"What little use I am," said Switch. "I can't even use my full potential yet. I'm only fit for pushing paper."

"Pull the other one!" said Floppy. "You still believe the twins are alive somewhere. Most of the force has given them up for dead. If they are alive and you weren't here, we'd not even be bothering looking for them."

"So don't you dare believe you're a dead weight," said Heatsink.

"Besides, someone's got to do the paperwork," said Jumper.

"I just let the shredder do it." Floppy flashed Switch a grin, which he returned with a wink.

"Well." Switch picked up his tray and grimaced as he pushed himself to his feet. "I'd better get on with that rest then, hadn't I?"

"You haven't even finished your dinner," said Jumper.

"Yeh, I don't really know what I was thinking when I asked for nutpea mustard." Switch smiled down at him. "I'll see you when you get home."

"Take care now."

Switch felt the frogadier's eyes on him as he made his way from the cafeteria. He paused to empty the contents of his tray into the compost bin then strolled through the double doors to outside seating. A small path cut its way around into a small park and he took in a deep breath of fresh air. Filterted or not, it was still fresh and carried the fresh scent of leaves and ripe berries.

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and followed the path through the park. A few hatchlings stopped their ball game to throw surprised looks his way, their large eyes impossibly wide in their little faces. Switch gave them a warm smile and a playful wink which seemed to satisfy their curiosity. The ball bounced on the grass and a couple gave chase after it, while the remaining stragglers watched him over their shoulders as they ran after their friends.

Switch chuckled under his breath and continued his way through the park. He knew exactly where he was going. He'd made the trip several times now. Every lunch break he'd had available, every evening, even in the mornings when he'd made a deliberate point of leaving the apartment after Jumper had already gone. A little path shot off through the trees until it met a wild bramble bush. Switch clambered through it, thorns tugging at his cargo trousers. Beyond it was a long rail blocking access to the glass dome.

He leant across the rail and let his weight fall onto his arms, grimacing slightly. He adjusted his weight to be more comfortable and let out a wistful sigh. An ocean of blue spread before him,

creating a gradient from the sky to the land below. What he could see of the land was a spray of colour. Deceptively beautiful from so high up, but he knew most of those yellows were nothing more than toxic air.

He looked back up at the sky, dotted with white fluffy clouds. In the distance he could see a ship flying gracefully over them. Its form was that of a fish painted in hues of pink and purple. He couldn't see it in detail, but he was fairly certain it was a bruxish.

So far it was the only ship in sight. Sometimes he didn't see any at all. And he never, ever saw Wildcard Gamma. He pulled his computer out of his pocket and held it between both hands. It was still new, handed to him by Jumper before he left the hospital. His thumb slid over the screen, bringing up his contacts. Only two were listed. Jumper and Macro. He'd been assured Macro had been sent his details, that he would contact him. It crossed Switch's mind several times a day to ring him, find out where he was and if he was coming back. Several times a day he checked the news, made sure Macro was still listed as 'wanted'. At least that way, he was ninety percent certain he was still alive, then went back to warring with himself over ringing at him.

But it gnawed deeply at him that he wouldn't answer. Somehow that felt a lot worse than waiting. Then he'd be worrying. Worrying he wanted nothing to do with him. Worrying he'd actually been killed somehow, and not at the paws of Socket.

Not answering actually frightened him, something he wasn't proud to admit.

Once again, 'no' won the battle. He would just wait. Macro knew where he was, and he knew why he was there. But still… he was more than ready to leave. To find his way home.

He slipped the computer back into his pocket and gazed back out at the vast sky.

"Where are you, Macro?" he asked. "Why haven't you come back for me?"

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 47

A/N - Just a heads up that the regular update date for this 'fic is being changed to a Saturday. It suits me a lot better, while still being updated in time for weekend. Ordinarily I'll try to update it in the morning UK time, but I was out this morning so it's a little later than I would have liked.

Thanks for all the faves and follows! =D

Chapter Forty Seven

Macro felt like he was floating in a cloud. A warm cloud, bathed in sunlight. His mind was filled with a dense fog that refused to clear. Everything was dark.

Then he realised his eyes were closed.

He forced them open and bright lights dazzled him, chasing the fog away. He raised a paw to rub at his eyes, willing them to adjust to the brightness.

"You with us now, Cap'n?" Anchor's voice sounded distant, lost in all that light.

"Hnh?" Macro mumbled.

"Cap'n?" Anchor was clearer this time. Louder.

Wildcard Gamma's familiar cockpit revealed itself around him, and his eye immediately went to the fine crack along the windshield. It all came rushing back and his heart flipped into his throat.

"We're… we're still flying!"

His voice sounded mechanical and he coughed into his paw. A violent, racking cough that caused whatever he'd mistaken for a

cloud to shift behind him. He looked down at DL's white paw clasped over his scarf. Her other paw was fastened snuggly around his left wrist. She released his paw as though she expected him to sit back up, but his heart was still racing and he worried if he did he'd just collapse again.

"Thank goodness," said Anchor. "You gave us a right fright. Thought that thing had scared the life outta ya."

"So I wasn't the only one who saw it?" Macro croaked. "How long was I out?"

"About a minute," said Matrix. "So not long."

"Fifty six seconds," said DL.

"Seconds?" Macro ventured to push himself upright but found himself restrained in DL's arms.

"I can't let you up," she said. "You've had a shock. I've every right mind to put you in your bed."

"I'm fine. It ain't the first time I've fainted." Macro wrestled himself free and let himself flop onto the opposite arm of his seat. "Besides. I wanna know what happened. Where are Zero Day? What was that… monster I saw?"

"Zero Day have fled," said DL. "I believe there was more than one of those creatures, and they chased off Zero Day."

"As for what it was…" Anchor raised his paws then let them fall back onto the dashboard. "No clue."

"It looked like something out of a nightmare," said Macro. "All skeletal with no eyes."

"I'd say it looked more like a plant." Matrix wound his antenna slowly as his eyes drifted to the window. "It reminded me of bamboo. A bamboo scarecrow wearing a weird veil-like hat."

"It scared more than just crows," Macro muttered.

"It's gone now, anyway," said Anchor. "Took off like a rocket. Blasted the ship in the process. I thought we were gonna fall."

Macro ran a paw over his face and clenched his teeth together. After everything they'd just been through, he dreaded to think what repairs his ship would need. There was nothing he could do about it now, not when they'd travelled so far across System. Besides, turning around would likely only put them in the thick of Zero Day once again.

His eyes snapped open and he stared out at the vast, black sky. "You said it's gone…"

"Yeh." Anchor was hesitant. "Like I said, I dunno where."

"And there's more than one." Macro bit down on his claw. "They're gonna be attacking cities just like that jellyfish thing, aren't they?"

Anchor bit his lip but he didn't look at him. "Cap'n, I think it's safe to say the end of the world is nigh."

Macro groaned and his head fell into his paws.

"I mean, that thing were huge!" said Anchor. "Half the size of our ship!"

"I'd say it were at least ten foot tall," said Matrix. "And if a number of them could chase off those deranged porygon z…"

"Let's just hope they dealt with some of them," said Macro. "Give us less to worry about."

Anchor grimaced and shrugged his shoulders. "We can hope."

"Anyway." Macro turned his head towards Matrix. "How are we gettin' on following those co-ordinates?"

"We're still going," said Matrix. "It estimates we'll have reached them by about five am."

"All right. If all that's cleared, I guess I'll take DL's advice and lie down."

Macro slipped from his seat, but as soon as his feet hit the floor his head felt light and the whole room began to spin. His paw shot to his head and he staggered backwards into his seat. DL was beside him like a dart and caught him before he fell to the floor.

When Macro opened his eyes again, the room was still spinning slightly and Anchor looked as taut as a spring about to snap.

"I think she's right," said the granbull. "But I think someone should carry you."

"I'm not being carried like some invalid," Macro growled. "I'll be fine. I just need to… go slow."

Anchor frowned slightly. "You're real stubborn, Cap'n."

Macro turned away from him and moved slowly out of the cockpit. He felt Anchor's eyes on him the whole way, and Macro knew if he so much as bumped into the doorway he'd be scooped up in the granbull's arms before he could blink.

DL beat him to the door and slipped an arm around his back. Part of him wanted to protest, but the other wanted to fall into her and let her lead him down the corridor. He didn't think either would go down well, so he settled for an in-between and walked quietly at her side, reassured that there was little chance of him falling over since the ship just wouldn't stop spinning.

"I don't know if you realise this," she said, "but your crew actually care about you."

"Oh, I know," he said. "We all have a funny way of showing it."

"You're saying you care about your crew?" She raised an eyebrow. "About Anchor, Matrix, Cookie…?"

He snorted out laughter, the effort throwing his balance. He had to steady himself against her, and his arm found its way around her back. "Of course I do."

She stiffened slightly and her eyes wandered to his paw fastened around her waist. For a moment he thought he should snatch it back, but she relaxed and continued leading him down the corridor.

"What about me?" she asked.

"DL." He stopped and turned his head to look at her. Man, everything was still spinning. "Do you really think I'd be helping you get your memories, and keeping you away from Socket, if I didn't care?"

She shrugged, avoiding his eyes. "Some of the things you say sometimes make me wonder."

He flinched and looked away from her, and she pressed her paw into his back to encourage him towards his room.

"Come on," she said. "We're almost there."

"Listen," he said. "I honestly don't mean everything I say. I just get… pretty heated sometimes."

"I'm beginning to learn that." She stopped beside his room and nodded to the panel beside it. "Let yourself in. I'm not sure it will recognize me."

He shrugged and placed his paw on the panel. The doors slid open silently.

"It recognizes all my crew," he said. "All the rooms do. In case of emergencies." He took a deep breath and closed his eyes as he pulled himself away from her to lean against the doorway. The image

of a blazing room filled his mind and he rubbed the bridge of his muzzle in a desperate bid to remove it. "I don't take any chances."

She pulled him back towards her and fastened her paw around his waist. The warmth of her body shooed away the awful memory and he let himself lean against her as she steered him into his room.

"Okay," she said. "You get yourself in bed."

She released him and took a step back. He flopped onto his bed, cold in contrast to her warm fur.

"Can I get you anything?" she asked.

He became aware he had his eyes closed. He cracked them open, meeting her chocolate gaze. A strange bubbling sensation welled from his stomach into his chest and he took in a trembling breath as he tore himself away. He pressed one paw over his eyes and waved the other one at her.

"No," he said. "Just leave."

"So… you don't want me here?" she asked.

He shook his head but didn't look back at her. "Don't take it personally. It's just my 'no girls in my room' rule."

"I understand." She crept across his room and paused at his door. "If you do need anything…"

"I'll call you."

His door hissed shut and he rubbed his paws over his face. That strange sensation didn't leave. Every heartbeat felt like a flutter, and oddly enough he didn't hate it.

What he did hate was knowing DL wasn't going to stay on his ship. Sooner or later, she was going to leave. And every second he drew

closer to the next disk was another second closer to her leaving. The thought alone felt like a hot blade running through his heart.

And he had only himself to blame.

Well, that put an end to the pleasant flutter.

He took in a few quick breaths as nausea decided to join in with the spinning room, and wiped away a few stray tears from his eyes. Why was he such a jerk?

He rolled onto his side and grabbed one of his pillows, clutching it to his chest. He buried his face into it, trying to stifle out the dizziness and self loathing.

He didn't want her to leave.

He wanted her to stay.

He wanted to make her happy. To see her smile. To hear her laugh.

Somehow, he needed to fix things between them. The problem was, he'd never been all that good at fixing things.

…

"So let me get this straight." N0ize spread his arms, making the little stool he was sat on look even smaller. "You say you came from a different time line, and the mayor wants to stick you in a lab?"

Annie nodded her head, each bob rather over-dramatic although she didn't appear to be aware of it.

The incineroar scratched his nose and gazed up at the yellowed ceiling. "Huh. Not sure if I believe it."

Tracer removed his cigar from his lips and puffed out a ring of smoke. Annie watched it drift in front of her in fascination.

"It is rather hard to believe," he said. "But given the footage Socket sent us, I'm not going to swat it aside so freely. I mean… we have a human sat right here. That's evidence enough that something's amiss in my books."

"Between a form-changing human and a water dweller with mechanical legs, this feels like more of a freak show," said N0ize. "How do we know Socket ain't just toyin' with us?"

"Because we gave Zip his legs." Trojan leant against the door and frowned at the space pirate. "Annie found him flailing in the street and brought him to us."

"Seems an odd thing to do." N0ize nodded at Zip. "Don't take this the wrong way, kid, but I only ever see your kind displayed in meat shop windows." He grinned, flashing two rows of sharp, glinting teeth. "Or on plates."

Zip cowered towards the bottom of his bowl and his bottom lip quivered. "Annie…"

Annie snatched her attention from the smoke ring, locking her eyes on the incineroar's. "Sorry, pussycat, but that little fish is off the menu."

"I weren't gonna eat him." N0ize snorted and looked away. "Not got enough meat on him anyway."

Zip groaned and edged closer to the human, his mechanical legs creaking with each movement and their sharp feet scratching over the wooden floor. The graceless movements reminded Tracer of a drunken hitmonlee he'd had to apprehend once.

"You said the mayor sent you footage?" Trojan shifted his weight, almost stepping on the skuntank curled up at his feet like a rug. "I wanna see this footage."

"You can't take Annie's word for it?" Tracer waved a paw at the human who was more occupied with admiring the peeling wallpaper.

"You initially wanted to apprehend her," said Trojan. "Now you're as baffled and… fascinated… as we are. The difference here is, you have first hand information that we don't. All we know is Socket said somethin' to Annie and she retaliated and gave the mayor what for."

"Oh, I gave her what for all right." Annie grinned and balled her fist. "I weren't goin' back in no lab. So I took my magic pills and booked it."

Tracer met the scrafty's eyes and took a long drag on his cigar, mulling over whether or not to show him the footage. After all he'd heard, he was growing more and more suspicious that Socket was the one in the wrong.

He breathed out a long trail of smoke and said slowly, "There's no sound in this footage, be aware of that."

"Wait." Widget looked up as Tracer removed his computer from his pocket. "Didn't Socket tell you that's confidential?"

"If we're going to get to the bottom of things, we need to be open with one another," said Tracer. "Besides, we've already shown it to N0ize, so we've broken that deal already."

"Yeh but… that was in exchange for…" Widget rolled his eyes and let his ears droop. "Whatever. Why do I even care? It's not as if Socket and I get on anyway."

Trojan took the computer and crouched down so Web could see the screen. Small clicks came from Zip as he strolled over to them, and water sloshed around harmlessly in his glass bowl. The room fell into silence for the whole five minutes the footage played out for, the only sounds coming from Annie as she muttered to herself about the yellowing walls. Tracer thought he heard her liken them to a summer's day.

The scrafty snickered, then burst into fits of laughter. Web shook her head, but a small smile played at her lips. She retrieved the computer and rose up onto her hind legs to offer it back to the delphox, but before he could take it a large shadow loomed in the doorway.

Waveform looked at them each in turn, his wing paw held millimetres from the scarf covering the lower half of his face. When his eyes fell on Tracer and N0ize he froze and his feathers bristled.

N0ize grinned from ear to ear. "The mysterious owl returns."

"Here." Trojan took the computer from Web and held it up to Waveform before he had a chance to speak. "You're gonna wanna see this."

The decidueye took the computer cautiously, giving the detective one last glance before activating the video.

"Pretty interesting," said Trojan. "Know what I think? I think it should be broadcast across all of System so everyone can see what a jackin' mess the mayor truly is."

N0ize threw his head back and roared out laughter. Tracer flinched and pulled his ear back.

"I think that would be incredibly foolish," he said, bringing N0ize back to silence. "Have you any idea of the implications that could-"

"What?" Trojan spat. "'Cos she trusted you with it and you've gone and shown it to space pirates and thugs?"

Tracer opened and closed his mouth as he stared at the scrafty. The only word he could find was a staggered 'well…'

Trojan spat, keeping his eyes on the delphox. "Yeh. 'Well', indeed. Shamus only cares about his own hide. Don't care jack about us livin' hard in the outskirts."

Tracer placed a paw to his chest and lowered his cigar. "I live in the outskirts!"

"So do I," said Widget. "And Defrag."

"Yeh, local coppers," said Trojan. "Fear factor, just like Proxy Prison. Or is it really 'cos Socket don't want you in Meta City?"

He turned that question onto Widget. The eevee's ears drooped slightly but his brown eyes were fierce. Even the fur along his back bristled and his tail whipped from side to side, flicking up dust from the threadbare rug. Tracer began to fear for the scrafty's safety, so he placed a paw on his small friend's back.

"Leave it," he said. "It doesn't matter why we live in the outskirts. But he's not wrong to assume it's a fear factor."

Widget let out a strangled laugh and fixed Trojan with one of his cheeky grins. "You're right. I'm not allowed in Meta City. But it doesn't mean I don't go there."

Trojan's face fell and N0ize let out another roar of laughter.

"He really has got guts!" said the space pirate.

"Anyway." Tracer popped his cigar back in between his lips and turned back to the distracted human. "We've gone wildly off topic. Annie?"

"Huh?" She snapped her head around to look at him. "Have I missed something?"

"Nothing important." Tracer leant back into the rickety chair. "You've not told me why exactly you are in Pulse City?"

"Oh, that's easy." She leant against the wall and tucked her arms behind her head. "We're just recruiting space pirates to take on the mayor and throw her off her high horse."

Tracer's jaw went slack and his cigar bounced off his knee and landed on the bare floor. Had he heard her right? She was basically a catalyst starting off a rebellion?!

Waveform looked up from the computer and stuffed it back into Trojan's paws. He lifted a wing and pulled out a long, slender feather, the end of which glinted dangerously in the low light.

"You've said too much," he told Annie as he strolled into the room.

"Wait!" Web gasped, rising to her feet. "Don't be an idiot!"

Tracer watched Waveform like a hawk as he turned to face the detective, pulling out one of his long vines - a sickly green from spending too long in the outskirts. The decidueye pulled it back like a bow string and aimed the feather right at Tracer's head.

It sprang towards him, whizzing as it sliced through the air. A crack resounded through the room and all eyes were on the delphox. He crouched in his seat, his trusty stick raised above his head. The arrow quivered as it hung embedded in the ceiling, the reverberations slicing through the sudden, heavy silence.

Tracer snapped his head up to meet Waveform's eyes and lowered his stick, holding it defensively before him.

"Sorry, but you're not going to win this one," said Tracer. "Any night when I can't see you, sure. But if you think you can best me in a face to face duel, you are sadly mistaken. And also, outnumbered."

He glanced at his two comrades. Widget was on his feet, his body taught and ready to pounce. N0ize, however, stuck his claw in his ear and scratched it while his other arm was behind his head. He watched the two disagreeing pokemon with morbid amusement.

Waveform snorted and lowered his vine. "When you leave here, you'd better watch your back, detective." He turned to leave the room, pausing to look at Annie. He turned back to Tracer and

pointed a feather at him. "No one lays a claw on her, you understand me?"

Tracer raised an eyebrow and lowered his fire stick. "One day, I hope you'll tell me what your fascination is."

Waveform span towards the door, his feathers billowing behind him like a cape. He tucked his wings to his sides and stepped past Web and Trojan effortlessly.

Web looked up at Tracer and let out a sad sigh. "I think it would be safer for you to book a room. He won't let this go, believe me."

N0ize removed his claw from his ear and examined it. "Sounds like a shady decidueye I know. Well… not know personally. But news 'bout bounty hunters gets around here, yanno." He paused and looked at Tracer somewhat aghast. "You don't think it's him, do ya?"

"If he is, he's a dead 'mon walking." Tracer pushed himself to his feet. "Well, I'm going to take Webber's advice. Widget, if you could book us a room?"

Widget looked up at him and smiled. "With a view? Lakeside, park side?"

He laughed and skipped from the room with his tail held high. Tracer looked back at Annie and folded his paws together on his lap, not relinquishing his stick.

"I hope you are aware," he said slowly, "of the repercussions of such an endeavour?"

She blinked at him, still leaning back against the wall. "Pardon?"

Tracer sighed and retrieved his smoldering cigar. It had left a small black patch on the worn wood.

"Your actions," he said. "If you are truly planning on rebelling against the mayor, which is what I took from your statement, then it could go

disastrously wrong. She is a force to be reckoned with, Annie, and you are already in her bad books. She hired me to retrieve you."

She shrugged, eliciting a raised eyebrow from Tracer.

"She needs dealing with," she said. "She's allowing pokemon to eat each other, she pulled me from my own time line with some weird time onion, and now she… wait…" She scratched her chin and looked up at the ceiling. "What were we talkin' about?"

Tracer blinked at her, dumbfounded, while N0ize laughed yet again.

Web shook her head and stood up. "I think we all need to get some sleep. Tuck yourself in, dear. The nice detective is done with you now."

"Hardly," N0ize grunted. "I wanna hear more."

"No. She's right. It's very late." Tracer stood up and returned his stick to his thick tail. "I trust you have somewhere to stay, N0ize?"

"Aye. Your room." The incineroar grinned at Tracer's stunned expression. "I ain't done here. I hope you're comfortable on the floor 'cos I don't share."

Widget paused in the doorway with a key fob between his teeth and looked between the two. He sighed and turned to go back the way he came. "I'll upgrade to a family room then, eh?"

…

It was late. Almost three in the morning, and Socket hadn't left her office. She paced back and forth beside the window, occasionally glancing out over Meta City. Lights flashed intermittently as hover cars sped past on their air tracks, and pokemon still trotted along the sidewalks coming from or going to she couldn't care less where.

The only thing that occupied her mind was Surge. Surge the liar. Surge who she'd doubted since she received the photos of the

magnezone and his fleet. Their gruesome bodies melted and deformed, sopping wet after their plunge into the lake. Mechanical eyes frozen in fear and shock. She didn't particularly care how the pokemon had felt. What she cared about was that Surge had gone against her orders, and murdered a large number of pokemon. That Surge had hacked into Socket's files and obtained her top secret plan. That, knowing that, Surge may very well tell others her plan. That Hunter obviously knew her plan given he was retrieving memory disks. If Socket's plan got out, the entirety of System would be thrown into an uproar. Pokemon may very well claim Socket's head.

How much did Surge really know?

Socket stopped in her tracks and tapped her claws over her arm for the umpteenth time that night. Her lips pursed together and she looked over at her holoscreen deck. If she were to contact Surge, what would she say? She wanted that zigzagoon behind bars, waiting to fry in her electric chair. But at the same time… something gnawed at her that Surge had a link with Hunter. Why else would she spare his life by melting a magnezone police fleet?

She hit the control on her desk and the holoscreen appeared before her.

"Ring Surge," she said.

The screen rang out, more times than she'd had cared for. Finally, Surge's face appeared on the screen. Her eyes were bloodshot and heavy rings made them look sunken as though she'd experienced years of severe stress.

"Mayor Socket." The zigzagoon yawned widely, flashing two rows of sharp teeth. "It's three in the morning."

"I'm very aware what time it is," Socket snapped. "Where are you right now? You look like you're on your ship."

"I am." Surge vanished off screen briefly and the faint beep of a computer emanated from the holoscreen's speaker. "I was following Wildcard Gamma. But I think I've lost them."

"Lost them?" Socket raised an eyebrow. "How do you lose a ship that size?"

"I don't know. I was receiving electrical interference, and then the ship just… vanished. My navigation system puts me at… the outskirts of System Sky?!" Her yelp of surprise bristled Socket's fur. Surge's voice dropped to a mutter as she spoke more to herself. "Why on earth is he travelling this far out?"

"Well, Surge. I need you back here in my office." Socket tapped her claws against her upper arm. "How long will it take you?"

The zigzagoon raised an eyebrow and scratched beneath her green bandanna. "You're calling me back? I was hot on his trail. Isn't it something you can tell me over the phone?"

"I've acquired some new information," Socket said slowly. "It requires you right here in my office. And if you aren't willing to come to me, I'll send someone to retrieve you, and they won't do it nicely."

Surge's eyes flitted from side to side and her mouth opened and closed like a seaking. "I'm sorry, Mayor, but you've asked me to bring him in, and-"

"Are you actually going to?" Socket's words drew Surge's attention right back to her. "Or are you going to slaughter another fleet of officers to save that pirate's hide?"

Surge stared back at her, dumbfounded. Her expression was even more like that of a seaking. One that was gasping for life, plucked from the ocean and left to dry on the sand.

"I'm sorry," she said carefully. "I don't understand."

"Oh, I think you do." Socket reached behind her for the photos and leafed through them. "A reliable source has told me that you're not just any mercenary. But you are actually a jack of all trades. Does the name Troll ring any bells?"

A flash of realisation flew across Surge's face and she tugged anxiously at her bandanna, desperate to avoid Socket's eyes.

"I see it does." Socket picked out one photo and dropped the others, turning it to face the holoscreen. "I've been torturing myself over these photos, Surge. I didn't want to believe it was you. But when you stab someone in the back, they talk. And Troll talked. A lot. Apparently you know your way around a computer. 'Hacking' being the term I'd like to use here. And I believe it was you who hacked into my systems to obtain valuable information, and then you relayed that back to Hunter. How much did he pay you?"

Surge's face paled with every word. Those heavy rings around her eyes almost vanished and she sank into her seat, fidgeting her paws together.

Socket chuckled and dropped the photo with the others. "A lot, I guess?"

Surge shifted uneasily and her paw vanished out of view. Socket watched her silently, waiting for her to flick off the holoscreen. To prove her guilt. To flee.

She stayed, breathing deeply and smoothing out her bristling fur, still avoiding Socket's eyes.

"May I ask you something, Surge? Why on earth would you risk your own life sparing his, rather than turning him in for the generous reward I was offering you?"

The past tense got the zigzagoon's attention. Or was it something else? Nevertheless, she looked at Socket head on before continuing.

"I don't know," she said. "Something didn't feel right."

Socket raised an eyebrow at that. "Oh?"

"I think you need to ask yourself something, Mayor." Surge leant forward in her seat so her entire face filled the screen. "Who's the guilty party here? You or him?"

Socket's jaw dropped and she staggered back into her desk. Her paws found the edge, stopping herself from slipping to the floor. She knew. The wretched zigzagoon knew!

Surge nodded and fell back into her seat. Her paw vanished from the screen again and she looked Socket in the eye, a smile tugging at her lips.

"I think that answers my question," she said, reaching for the hang up button.

"Wait!"

Surge froze and looked back up at her.

"You're playing a dangerous game," Socket told her. "You hacked into my system, Surge. You've acquired information that you know nothing about. Leaking it could cause a massive uproar. That alone will list you with a death sentence. Then all I have to do is put up a poster and all of System will be on your tail." She grinned at the sullen look on Surge's face. "That's right, little rat. Even space pirates. I'll stop at nothing to turn you in. And him. I know you've told him everything. Why else would he be breaking into government property to obtain little black disks?"

Surge shrugged. "Maybe the living computer he stole told him everything?"

"I've shut her off," said Socket. "Not only is she forbidden access, she's frozen. She's nothing now."

Surge shook her head and sat back in her seat. "Oh my dear Socket. How little you know. If I'm a dab hand at computers, surely a little computer program installed in a pokemon's brain is no problem?"

Socket felt all the blood leave her face.

Surge grinned and once again reached for the hang up button. "Check mate."

The screen flashed off, leaving Socket feeling cold and lost.

That wretched zigzagoon. That wretched Hunter. Oh, she'd catch them. She'd catch them and she'd kill them both. Personally.

She shook out her fur and brought the screen back up, this time shouting for Yobi. The raichu's sleep-deprived face filled the screen, alarming the gothitelle so much she actually screamed.

What was wrong with her?!

"Madam Mayor?!" Yobi dropped whatever it was he'd been holding, creating an almighty clatter as it bounced off the tiled floor. "What's the matter?"

"Surge!" she barked. "I want a wanted poster made for her. Mark it at fifty thousand credits. Do the same for Hunter, and the rest of his crew."

"But…" Yobi scratched behind his ear. "Isn't that usually Tweak's job?"

"He's asleep. I need this doing now!"

"Wouldn't it be better to… just send out your fleet?"

"They're scattered all over System Sky trailing Zero Day while stopping that little tyrant BackDoor from dragging in more aliens!" she spat. "I can't send them out after space pirates and hackers!" She went thoughtful, nibbling on her claw.

The raichu yawned and set aside his project. "All right. I can do it. Just send me the raw files and I'll get it out before dawn."

"Make sure you apply it to all of System. All of it. Space pirates and all."

Yobi looked up with a start, his ears flopping back and forth wildly. "Wait… what?"

"This is urgent. I want them turned in. They know too much, Yobi. Surge, Hunter and most likely the rest of his crew. They know our plan. If it gets out-"

"I understand. I'll do it. But… what if another wanted pirate turns them in?"

Socket laughed bitterly and looked away. "Then we kill them as well. After we've paid them of course. But don't put that on the posters."

Yobi nodded again and the screen flashed out. Socket sank down against her desk, a bitter laugh rising from her throat. It became even more hysterical the more she went over what she'd just said. The day she'd resort to using pirates… she'd never seen it coming.

It tasted vile.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 48

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! This chapter is a bit of a long one. Enjoy!

Chapter Forty Eight

Macro couldn't sleep. He lay on his bed, forcing his eyes to stay closed in a desperate bid to at least snatch fifteen minutes. The battle with Zero Day was still fresh in his mind, whirring around in a chaos of flash backs and worse-case-scenarios. Then there was that horrible, screaming beast. Add to the list the crazy noise the ship's engine was making, sleep just wouldn't come at all. And they were too far out from Pulse City to do anything about the engine now. Nowhere safe to land. Below them was just ocean and icebergs. Icebergs so desperately cold that nothing could get close to them without freezing to death, let alone live on them.

Then there was DL. The thought of her leaving made him feel sick, so he forced the thought to the back of his mind and focused on the recent battle with Zero Day. If they encountered them again, how could they handle things differently? Where did they go wrong in that battle? There were so many of them. So many tiny robots kitted out with the same kind of fire power you found on battleships. Wildcard Gamma was equipped with turrets to deal with aerial combat. More so as a means of defence rather than offence. It seemed Zero Day was made the same way. They defended themselves. Took out those who were unfortunate enough to witness what they were up to.

He checked the clock on his computer. Almost four thirty in the morning. If Matrix's assumption was correct, they should be at The Cache very soon. He clambered out from beneath the sheets and retrieved his scarf. It lay in a strewn heap over his chair, tossed there shortly after DL had left him. His goggles lay beneath it. He fastened them over his head and tossed his scarf over his shoulders, trying to ease out the creases. It was now dry, and given how it had been

lying for the past hour, sported some pretty intense creases. Hopefully it would iron itself out with the warmth of his body.

He pushed himself to his feet, wobbling slightly as nausea and dizziness overtook him. Great. He was still feeling rough from his faint. He placed a paw on the side of his head and strode carefully out of his room. When his door hissed open, he froze. DL's door lay wide open, and he spotted her perched on the edge of her bed. She looked up at him and a small smile played at her lips, but it was washed away very quickly as though she was trying to hide it. Confusion gnawed at him and he fought the urge to march away.

"We should be there soon," he said. "So I'm going back to the cockpit."

She rose to her feet and walked silently to the door. "How are you feeling now?"

He shrugged. "A bit better. But I need to be up. Got work to do."

"The Cache isn't going anywhere. I'm sure when we get there we'll wait for-"

He silenced her with a wave of his paw. "I'm not just going to sleep through it. What if this place is heavily guarded? Wildcard Gamma needs her captain, and darned if I'm gonna let a little wooziness stop me from doing my job."

"Okay." She wound her paws together and leant against the door frame. "I just don't want you to do anything foolish."

"Since when have I ever done anything foolish?"

"Oh, I don't know." Her voice was thick with sarcasm. "How about stealing me? Rushing into heavily armed buildings? Throwing yourself off a rooftop to escape being caught? Aggravating gangs and mobs in the outskirts?" At his raised eyebrow, she nodded. "Matrix talks a lot over breakfast."

"That's not foolishness, sweetheart, it's work."

"No, it's foolishness. You just happen to come out of it very well."

He sighed and turned away towards the cockpit. "Foolishness or not, if it gets the job done I'll do it. You coming to the cockpit or getting some sleep? 'Cos it looks to me like you ain't had any."

"Well." She looked back at her bed, still rubbing her paws together. "If we're almost there, then I guess I'll join you."

"Don't wanna be the only one asleep, eh?"

He adjusted his goggles and marched towards the cockpit, silently berating himself for speaking so harshly. Before he reached the kitchen, he let himself flop against the wall and rubbed a paw over his scar.

"Look, DL, I'm sorry. I'm just super stressed right now."

For a moment, he thought she'd gone back into her room. But a warm paw fell on his shoulder and steered him away from the wall. He looked up to see her beside him, not looking his way. He picked up his pace, walking out of her arm and into the cockpit.

Anchor sat in his usual seat, his arms tucked behind his head as he surveyed the starscape. Loud snores came from Macro's left and he looked around at Matrix. The ribombee lay back in his seat, his head lolling against the head rest and his mouth wide open. Macro reached out and tapped him on the head. Matrix sat up with a snort and shook out his antenna, then looked back at Macro.

"Sorry, Captain," he said. "Pretty tired."

"Tell me about it." Macro fell into his seat. "How long now?"

"Estimates about thirty minutes until we're there," said Matrix.

"Then we should brace ourselves," said Macro. "They might be heavily armed."

"Way ahead of ya," said Anchor. "Turrets are already armed and ready to go."

Macro had nothing to say to that. Instead, he gave the granbull a huge grin, receiving one in return.

DL climbed up into the seat beside Macro and he shuffled along to allow her to buckle herself in. Not that he felt he needed the seatbelt, but he didn't want to argue with her. Besides, if they ended up in combat, it was better to be safe than sorry. He didn't really fancy smacking into the windshield.

Stars zipped past Wildcard Gamma as it advanced towards an unknown destination. Doubts gnawed at Macro's gut. What if the co-ordinates really were just his imagination? He fumbled in his pouch for his computer and whipped it out, switching on the display. The disk locations glared back at him almost blindingly in the darkness of System Sky, still open from the computer's previous use. As he stared back at it, his mouth turned dry. No sun symbol burned behind the writing. No co-ordinates were listed under The Cache. He looked up with a start, his mouth hanging open.

"Are you okay?" DL asked softly.

He said nothing, staring straight ahead. Anchor sat humming away, oblivious to Macro's distress, carefully steering the ship through the emptiness. Soft snores were the only sounds coming from Matrix. Macro warred with the desire to tell his crew and to keep it quiet. Tell them he was mistaken, or play the oblivious fool. He glanced back down at the screen, desperate to see that sun symbol and those odd numbers. But they were as plain as when Surge sent them to him. Maybe they'd always been plain? He was clearly going crazy. Tiredness. Stress. That's what it was.

Soft cracking sounds flooded the cockpit and he looked up again, and his eyes widened slowly. The entire windshield was being consumed by frost, the cobweb shapes spreading from the edges towards the centre of the window.

Anchor's humming came to an abrupt stop. "I don't like this, Cap'n. I don't think many pokemon have been this far out."

"We appear to have reached the Dead Glacier," said Matrix. "I fear if we travel much further over it, the fuel will freeze."

Macro's computer trembled in his paws as he watched the frost creeping over the window. There was no way. No way they could make it over the Dead Glacier. Temperatures on the surface were rumoured to reach as low as absolute zero during the coldest months. Of course, no one could get close enough to actually find out. It created a permanent barrier around System, and many believed it marked the edge of the world. That beyond it was nothingness.

Metal creaked as it contracted and small cracks spread from the corners of the windshield, jerking out erratically. Cold air whistled through them, blasting Macro's face and peppering his fur with frost. He swiped at it and tugged his scarf tighter around himself. DL shivered next to him and he released his computer to wrap an arm over her shoulders. He turned his head to speak to Anchor but words died on his tongue. The granbull's face was twisted with worry and his eyes fluttered left and right.

"I'm trin' to turn around." Every word he spoke formed mist in the air. "But she ain't listenin' to me."

"The fuel's not f-frozen yet." Matrix's wings buzzed frantically over his voice in a desperate bid to stay warm. "At least… I don't think s-so?"

Frozen fuel or not, something was up. Wildcard Gamma crept further into the glacier's territory, the entire hull complaining with the shock

of cold emanating from the surface. Sharp cracks shot across the glass, letting yet more freezing air into the ship.

DL huddled into Macro's side, her paws winding into his thick fur. Her breath formed misty clouds that froze into dust on his scarf. He let his computer fall to the floor in favour of wrapping his arms around her. At least they could keep each other warm. Frost dusted her fur and he swept it away, feeling the cold bite through his paw pads.

Anchor hugged himself and rubbed his arms frantically, casting Macro a look of utter distress. That look alone confirmed Macro's fears.

If the ship refused to turn around, its body would inevitably shatter. The fuel would freeze. They'd plummet to the surface and die before they even hit the ground.

Macro took in a trembling breath and closed his eyes.

"Anchor? I… You were right. I was seeing things…" He shook his head slowly and pulled DL closer into him. "There were no numbers… on that list."

Anchor sighed and huddled into his chair. "I weren't gonna doubt ya, Cap'n."

"S-so what you're s-saying is," said Matrix, "that if we d-die… it's your f-fault?"

Macro bit his lip and stared out of the window, not that he could see anything anymore. "Yeh."

"Don't be ridiculous, Cap'n!" Anchor roared. "You wouldn't have knowingly sent us out to the freakin' glaciers!"

"No, I wouldn't have." Macro looked up at him and flashed his canines. "But I forced you to follow somethin' that was clearly formulated by my exhausted brain!"

Anchor shook his head slowly but he never took his eyes off Macro. "Exhausted or not, you coulda been right, and we're with you 'til the end."

Macro stared at Anchor for a moment then DL caught his gaze. She stared up at him, no anger behind her eyes. Instead she looked fearful… sad… and she wound her claws into his scarf. Macro turned around stiffly to see Matrix huddled on his seat, his wings beating wildly in intermittent bursts. Whenever they stopped, Macro noted the very edges had turned red. The ribombee nodded, agreeing with Anchor's words, and Macro sank back into his chair feeling tears prick at his eyes. Crying would be a foolish mistake. A lump rose in his throat and he huddled into DL, but what little warmth she gave off was washed away with every biting draught seeping through the cracked windshield.

All the lights blinked off and the entire ship shook, sending Macro's stomach shooting into his chest.

"This is it." Anchor ran his paws over his face then went back to hugging himself. "We're gonna fall."

DL practically climbed into Macro's lap, her wild eyes fixed on the frosty glass barrier.

Everything was completely obscured, and with every tremble and lurch from Wildcard Gamma, Macro's heart skipped a beat. He couldn't tell if they were falling or not. All he could do was brace himself for impact.

"I want you to know somethin', Cap'n. No… Macro." Anchor's voice trembled. "I know it might sound soppy, but I don't give a ratatta's tail. You're the best friend I ever had."

Macro grit his teeth together and screwed his eyes shut. "Likewise. I know I can be an ass."

"Oh yeh, you can be an ass." Anchor laughed bitterly. "But what friends aren't asses with each other at times?"

Matrix's buzzing cut out and his voice cracked. "I don't say things like this often at all, but… same here. You're both asses and I love you."

Macro didn't even care if he was trying to be funny. At least it lifted some of the tension from the air. A dry chuckle left his throat and he felt DL shift in his arms.

"Macro?" Her voice was weak.

He looked down at her, meeting those warm fondue eyes. For a fleeting moment he didn't feel cold anymore. She opened her mouth to speak, but the entire ship shook violently and she threw herself back against him. Macro fell back into his seat as the ship's nose turned towards the sky. Were they seriously going to fall tail-first? It didn't even make any sense.

Then he remembered where the engines were. Held in the pelvic fins at the rear of the ship. If the fuel had frozen, then…

He bit his lip so hard he tasted blood.

But instead of falling, the ship crept upwards. Further and further towards the sky. Then it levelled out ever so slightly, still moving up at an incline. Were they caught in some kind of tractor beam? He opened his eyes, but his view was obscured by the heavy frost.

"I think something's pulling us in," he said.

Anchor twisted to look at him. "But what? Some kind of rescue vessel?"

Macro's heart fluttered in a desperate bid to break free. What vessel would rescue Wildcard Gamma? Bounty Hunters? No… he'd rather freeze to death.

He released DL and slipped from the chair.

"Where're you goin'?" Anchor watched Macro stagger from the cockpit.

The mawile paused by the door and looked back over his shoulder. "Bailin'."

"But it's close to absolute zero down there!" Anchor roared. "Get your fuzzy butt back in your chair!"

A deep buzz filled the cockpit and Matrix hovered in the doorway with his arms spread. Despite being a blur, his wings looked sore and cracked, and his face contorted as he strove to stay airborne. "You aren't g-going anywhere."

Macro flashed his canines and swept an arm through the air, narrowly missing the ribombee. "Move it."

"Make me."

Macro looked around at the cockpit and his brow furrowed. "Do you really think anyone who's rescuin' us is doin' it out of kindness?"

"Maybe not," said Anchor. "But at least their ship works! Ours is gonna crash if we keep flyin'."

"I ain't lettin' them turn me into Socket!" Macro snapped. "I refuse to give her that satisfaction!"

"Who says they're even workin' for Socket?" Anchor asked. "You ain't got a clue." He waved at the frosted window. "We can't even see their ship!"

"That don't matter! You know the price on my head! Pokemon's eyes swirl with credits signs whenever they freakin' look at me!"

"So what? You're just gonna throw yourself to your death out of paranoia? Not everyone's against you, Macro! Look at Jumper and Cyan City! Even Surge has bailed us out a few times, right?"

"Really? Surge?" Macro sneered and felt his fur bristle. "Turns out she's workin' for Socket n'all. Tried to freakin' shoot me."

Anchor's jaw dropped. "When?"

"Back in Pulse City. Look, it don't matter. I ain't lettin' anyone turn me in. You wanna take that risk, you take it. But I'm not. I'm goin'."

DL poked her head over the back of Macro's seat, her eyes glistening with unshod tears. "Don't… please…"

Macro dug his claws into the door frame and tried to look anywhere but at the pachirisu.

"Look. Put it this way." Anchor spread his paws. "Once we're aboard their ship, if they're hostile, we fight! We got a whole loot room full of weapons. Once we're free, we shoot right out of the Dead Glacier's territory and get back to Pulse City for a good, warming drink. 'Kay?"

Macro choked and screwed his eyes shut, sinking down against the wall. "I don't wanna die…"

"And you won't," said Anchor. "Provided you stay on this ship. We can do this. Reason your tag's so high is 'cos Socket can't flippin' catch you."

Macro's heart was racing. He couldn't recall a time he'd ever felt so defenceless. He sank down to his bottom and buried his face in his paws, letting out a long groan. There was no way he was going to let anyone turn him or his crew in. He'd go down fighting if he had to.

Soft footprints crept closer to him and he cracked his claws apart to see DL reaching down to him. He waved a paw to push her away and clutched the wall, dragging himself to his feet. But he was thrown against it as the ship rocked violently. Yelps flew around the cockpit and he heard a thud from the hallway. He did a quick head count. No sign of Matrix.

"Are you all right, Matrix?" Macro barked.

"Yeh," came a feeble cry from the corridor. "J-just a little b-bruised."

Macro looked over at the windscreen. Frost melted away into water and flowed over the nose of the ship. The entire ship groaned as the ice thawed away, creaking and cracking ominously, shuddering as parts fell away into the abyss. A huge crack exploded from the corners of the window right across the centre of the glass, then the entire thing erupted into shards, peppering the cockpit and bouncing off its occupants. Macro instinctively covered his nose, expecting the air to be sucked out of his lungs. But nothing happened. He lowered his paw and stared transfixed at the world outside.

Well… it wasn't so much a world as an anomaly. No sky. No blackness. Just a huge, bright light broken up into a swirling checkered pattern of blue and white. Dazzling, yet it wasn't impossible to look at. It swirled around them like a tube and Wildcard Gamma was being dragged along inside it.

"This ain't no ship."

The words flew out of Macro's mouth before he had any time to even process them. He half expected Anchor to reply with a 'duh!' but instead the granbull just shook his head, staring aghast at the strange sight before them.

Then Macro noticed one key fact. They were no longer freezing. Wherever they were, it wasn't the Dead Glacier. He dragged himself back to his feet, still staring from the window. Matrix buzzed back into the cockpit and hovered at Macro's head.

"Where in System are we?" The ribombee darted to the navigation system and shook his head slowly. "We're not even on the map anymore. Wait…"

Matrix stared down at the computer, wrapping his antenna around his paw. His face seemed to pale and he sank down into his chair.

"Is something wrong?" Macro asked.

Matrix continued to stare at the screen. "Two, four, six, three, five, seven."

"Eh?"

"Those are the 'co-ordinates' you gave me."

"I don't care for the air quotes, Matrix."

Matrix looked back at him and pointed a claw at the screen. "They're here. Listed. No map, just a black screen and those weird numbers."

Macro crept over to him and peered over his shoulder. He wasn't wrong. Across the black display was a string of yellow numbers, and they blinked erratically as though being disturbed by some invisible magnetic field.

Heavy footsteps and panting reached his ears and he glanced back to see Cookie staggering into the cockpit. He leant against the wall with one paw, his tongue lolling out of his mouth as he desperately tried to catch his breath.

"What… why is the ship slanted?" he gasped.

"We're currently trying to work that out," said Anchor.

Cookie finally looked up at the window and a surprised, husky squeak squeezed from his throat. Then his eyes rolled back and he fell heavily onto his back, sliding from the door head first. DL leapt to her feet to chase after him and grabbed him by his stubby legs.

"I can't hold him for long," she whined.

Anchor stood and grabbed Cookie by the scruff, placing him into Macro's chair.

"Poor 'mon's not seen outside in years, and this is the first thing that greets him?" Anchor shrugged and fell heavily into his seat. "If it were me, I'd faint n'all."

The ship jerked again and Macro clutched tightly to the back of Matrix's chair. All eyes were on the anomaly before them, swirling slowly as the ship was dragged along. At the end of it was bright light, and it grew in intensity. Macro shielded his eyes as the ship shot through it at a breakneck pace. The entire ship filled with light, then it fizzled out, leaving the ship feeling warm and secure.

It was an odd feeling, after all they'd been through.

Macro opened his eyes and looked around. Light. That's all he could see. Soft, golden and warm.

A peaceful silence washed through the ship. The only sounds were the exhausted breathing from Macro and his crew, and snuffles as Cookie came back around.

"Where are we?" DL asked.

It was a valid question. Macro mulled it over as he stared out at the vast expanse of warm light. Sat in an unknown location, after the ship had been dragged in by some invisible force. He was certainly beginning to get his suspicions.

He scratched beneath his goggles and turned to leave the cockpit. "I don't know. But I'm gonna find out."

"Hey, we don't know if it's safe," Anchor called after him.

Macro didn't look back as he vanished through the door. "It's gotta be safer than the Dead Glacier though, right?"

Anchor muttered something and rose to his feet to follow Macro. The mawile stopped by the exit hatch as all of his crew gathered behind him.

"What?" he asked. "All of you are comin' with me?"

Cookie shifted uneasily and looked back at the kitchen. "I uhm… I don't do outside."

"It ain't normal 'outside'," said Macro. "I'm beginning to think we got pulled through one of them porthole things."

"If that's the case, who opened it?" Anchor asked. "'Cos I seriously doubt Zero Day coulda survived that cold. Our ship barely survived!"

Macro folded his arms and shrugged. "Maybe BackDoor did."

"If BackDoor is also an android," said DL. "Then it's safe to say it wouldn't survive this cold either."

Macro sighed and opened the exit hatch. "Then let's have a look then, shall we?"

The ground wasn't far down at all. Wildcard Gamma appeared to have sunk into the floor like quicksand and lay submerged in it. Macro tentatively touched the floor with his toes, feeling warmth and solidity. When he stood on it, it was like climbing over a foam mattress. Soft and springy, yet not so much so he couldn't keep his balance. The warm light washed over his fur like a comforting cloud and he found himself feeling much more relaxed than he had simply looking out at it from the ship's shattered window.

He paused and looked back at the ship. Anchor, Matrix and DL were all following him, looking around at the expanse of light. Matrix perched on Anchor's shoulder, his cracked wings hanging limply behind him. Blood seeped from the cracks and the very edges of his wings had turned black amongst the angry red. Macro wondered how on earth the ribombee wasn't so much as grimacing.

Cookie stood in the ship's doorway, peering out and trembling. He slowly climbed down from the ship, muttering to himself quietly. Then he trotted after them until he reached Anchor's side.

"Are you okay?" DL asked softly.

"No, but…" Cookie swallowed audibly. "It's not like a city or anything, and I'm not staying alone on that ship while we're in such a strange place."

DL took his paw and the slurpuff calmed down slightly, keeping in pace beside her as they traversed the unusual landscape.

Warm and bright. It never changed despite how far they moved from Wildcard Gamma. The springy ground became less and less disorienting, instead providing a huge comfort after their freezing ordeal. Macro hadn't realised how sore his paw pads had been until they felt soothed on the warm, soft ground. It was everything he could do to not stop and sink into it, letting it soothe every aching and sore part of his body.

Something appeared in the light ahead of them. Almost a shadow, but not. It seemed to be radiating light itself, a darker glow amongst the brightness. With each step, it grew larger and larger, almost as if it was moving towards them despite not moving at all. It was unearthly. Like nothing Macro had ever encountered. Yet somehow he didn't want to rush back to his ship, or reach for his laser.

As the shape solidified - that was the best word Macro could think to describe it - it seemed to take on the form of a pyroar. But as it grew larger, it was definitely not a pyroar. It was too large, and the mane too pointed. If Macro were to liken its mane to anything, it would be a sun. They were also completely the wrong colour for a pyroar. Whatever they were, they were white, and radiated yellow light.

A pair of glowing, blue eyes looked down at them, and for the first time, Macro felt truly intimidated. Yet the eyes weren't threatening. They were welcoming, as if the being they belonged to had been expecting them.

"Macro." The voice seemed to come from everywhere at once, and was as deep as a lion's roar. "Wildcard Gamma. Welcome."

Macro's jaw went slack. He froze and stared up at the large, white lion. "You know me?"

"I know all of you," said the lion. "I called you here."

Macro stuttered and looked down at his paws. Everything was slowly starting to add up. He looked up again slowly and licked his dry lips.

"You… you put those co-ordinates on my computer?"

The lion nodded.

Macro didn't know what to say. Anchor let out a flustered breath and brushed back his mohawk.

"This is all a little too much to take in," said Anchor. "I don't even know where we are right now."

Cookie trembled audibly and ducked behind DL, who wasn't looking much better herself.

"But… who exactly are you?" Matrix asked. "Why have us fly over the Dead Glacier?"

"Because that's how you get here." The lion smiled. "I'm Solgaleo. And this is the Altar of the Sunne."

Macro's legs buckled beneath him and he landed hard on his bottom. Or it would have been hard if the ground hadn't been so soft. He stared aghast at the huge, white lion. Solgaleo… that was a name he hadn't heard of since he was a hatchling. So long ago that he'd near forgotten about it. A pokemon that was said to bring light from the sun. But along with many legends, Macro hadn't believed them. Legends had either become extinct, and if there were no evidence, deemed to be fabricated entirely from imagination.

"Okay," he muttered to himself. "Wake up, Macro. This is just another of them dreams you're having. You're just… lying frozen on your ship somewhere on the glacier's surface…"

"You are very much alive," said Solgaleo. "But you may wish to remain seated for what I'm about to tell you."

Macro looked back up at him. He seemed even larger from his position on the floor, and he just couldn't will his legs to push him back up again. He wound his scarf around in his paws and looked over at his crew. Anchor was still scratching his mohawk, while Matrix was looking around at the bright landscape. DL was trying to coax Cookie out from behind her to no avail, while not taking her eyes off Solgaleo.

"There's a reason I've called you here," said Solgaleo. "You already know there's a being travelling around System, opening pockets in time and space."

"Yeh," said Macro, finally pushing himself to his feet. "It's called BackDoor. But I didn't know it was a being, I thought it was a network."

"It's the main root of the network," Solgaleo explained. "And it takes the form of a Hoopa."

"Huh." Anchor let his paw fall to his side. "That explains the golden rings we've seen. Like that one Switch came through."

Macro pursed his lips together then sighed. Another legend to dig up from the depths of his childhood memories.

"However, this Hoopa is an android," Solgaleo explained, almost as if he was soothing Macro's confused mind. "It is not a creature of legend, merely inspired by it. Its capabilities are not akin to the real Hoopa, however it strives to be so. It can create pockets in time and space, but it struggles to find its own due to its restricted capabilities. Instead, it relies on the entities Zero Day and TimeSkip to find them. However, TimeSkip is one less android for you to worry about."

"You say this BackDoor is trying to be more like Hoopa," said Matrix. "Does that mean it can change shape?"

"No," said Solgaleo. "It doesn't currently have the coding to allow that. But it can, unlike Hoopa, travel and manipulate its powers through digital waves. It would merely have to look at live video footage and it could open up a pocket behind it.

"But BackDoor itself isn't the reason I've called you here. I know you're already aware of its existence, but what you might not be aware of is the invasion of dangerous beings being dragged through time and space by this android. You've already encountered two of them."

Macro let a small pause fly between them, just in case there was more Solgaleo wanted to add.

"Yeh, we… killed one of them," said Macro. "As for the other thing… well I don't know where that went to."

"It was Zero Day who let that through," Matrix added.

Solgaleo nodded. "Yes, I still need to explain the issue with Zero Day. But BackDoor has become obsessed with these creatures. He's dubbed them 'Ultra Beasts' and is hoping to find even more of them. The creature you destroyed, its species is nihilego, and there's an entire flock of those swarming throughout all of System. While another similar creature, a blacephalon, is wrecking havoc on System Ground."

"What?" Macro gasped. "There's more of those jellyfish things?!"

"A lot more. In their own universe, they are nothing to be feared. They are merely pokemon from another world, but to you they are aliens. In System, they pose a huge threat. They struggle to survive here. The atmosphere is different, and in many places toxic. Toxic even to you, let alone creatures from a world that lacks civilisation. They are trying to adapt, and as such are manipulating System to their own liking. Their food sources are vastly different to what you would eat. For example, nihilego is a parasite that attaches itself to

living beings and injects a neurotoxin to control them. It then feeds on their very life source."

"Like it controlled that ship?" Matrix asked.

"Precisely. It was the pilot it was controlling. Not the ship itself."

DL shuddered. "It sounds terrifying."

"And System's gonna be flooded with them." Macro sneered at the ground then looked up at Solgaleo. "So what are we supposed to do? It took a small army to stop just one of them!"

"That's why you are here," said Solgaleo. "Your weapons are nothing to these Ultra Beasts. You need something far more powerful. You need to drop these weapons you control and go back to your roots."

"Eh?" Macro raised an eyebrow. "But our weapons cover our weaknesses. Sure, I could take on a dragon type or a rock type single handedly, but if I was up against a fire type-"

Solgaleo raised a huge paw and waved him off. The size of his paw alone was enough to choke off Macro's words.

"I'm aware every pokemon has their strengths and weaknesses," said Solgaleo. "I don't expect you to do this alone, Macro. You're to work as a team. A much bigger team than you are right now. And you're to take with you a powerful weapon. Each of you. One that amplifies your own signature moves."

He waved his paw again and a long, flat box floated before them. It opened of its own accord, revealing two rows of small, colourful diamond-shaped jewels.

"These are Z Crystals," Solgaleo explained. "And each of them unlocks its user's full potential."

Macro and Anchor both reached forwards and picked one up. The one in Macro's paw was blue with the black outline of a water drop

inside it. With the warm light flowing through it, it looked dazzlingly beautiful.

"I've never heard of a Z Crystal," he said.

"Neither have I," Anchor grunted, turning the silver crystal left and right.

Matrix leant forwards and plucked it from his claws. "There's more than eighteen in that box. So I can't imagine they're all for different types?"

"There are thirty four in total," said Solgaleo. "But you'll be taking with you only a small number."

"So we're still gonna be a small team?" Macro asked. "Thirty four seems a much more comfortable number to me."

Solgaleo laughed and shook his head. "The team I've selected will be plenty. Allow me to explain these Z Crystals. Each of its owners will wear a ring around their wrist to contain it. Then, when you unleash your signature move, for example you, Macro, would be utilising 'play rough', hold the crystal above your head and it will then unlock the Z Move to go with it."

"Wow," said Macro. "I was worried there'd be more to it than that."

"Yeh," said Matrix. "Like having to strike a crazy pose."

"No, just hold it high," said Solgaleo. "It's that simple. However, you can only use the move once every twelve hours. The results of using it are exhausting, not just for you but for the Z Crystal itself. As such, make sure your timing is right."

"Exhausting?" Macro placed the blue Z Crystal back into the box. "I dunno. I'm not sure how much I like the idea of using these over my trusty laser. At least I can use that over and over."

"But your laser can be taken and used against you," said Solgaleo. "If a pokemon takes your Z Crystal, not only can they not use it if they don't know how, they cannot if they don't have the corresponding attack."

Macro looked up at Solgaleo, his mouth pulled into a frown. He couldn't deny he was torn. Having a weapon that couldn't be turned on him was an attractive idea.

"I can understand you're hesitant," said Solgaleo. "But I need to ask you to trust me. These are much more reliable and valuable to you than a mere firearm."

Macro stood up straight and scratched behind his head as he stared down at the Z Crystals. "Alright. You've sold me on them. We'll try them out."

Anchor nodded with a small grunt and took the blue crystal back off Matrix to return it to its box.

"I'm happy to hear that," said Solgaleo. "Then I'll explain to you each what your own crystal will do. Matrix, yours will be Buginium Z. That will allow you to utilise Savage Spinout via your bug buzz attack."

"Wow." Matrix's huge eyes became even larger. "That sounds brutal."

"Anchor." Solgaleo turned his eyes onto the granbull. "Yours will be Firium Z. That will turn your fire fang into Inferno Overdrive."

Anchor grinned and folded his arms. "I'm really liking the sound of these moves."

"DL. Yours will be Electrium Z. That will turn your discharge into Gigavolt Havoc. Cookie."

Cookie yelped and peeked out from behind DL.

"Your's will be Grassium Z. This will turn your energy ball into Bloom Doom, or if you prefer a more supportive roll, will change the affect of your aromatherapy to heal damage. And Macro, yours is Fairium Z. That will allow you to turn play rough into Twinkle Tackle."

Macro almost fell over backwards. His arms fell limp to his side and he looked from his friends to Solgaleo and back. Anchor smirked as he tried to stifle a laugh, while Matrix chuckled behind his paw.

"Twinkle Tackle?" Macro turned back to Solgaleo and tried desperately to regain his composure. "I didn't mishear you, did I?"

"No," said Solgaleo. "The fairy type Z-Move is Twinkle Tackle."

"I… what?" Macro stuttered. "It doesn't sound very intimidating. I mean, compared to Savage Spinout?" He gestured a paw towards Matrix.

"It doesn't need to be intimidating," said Solgaleo. "See it as its name covering up its hidden strength. Much like yourself, Macro. You may be small in stature, but your strength and bravery more than makes up for that."

"He's right," said DL. "This move definitely suits you."

Macro felt like he'd been struck with a tranquiliser dart. Those words made it sound a lot more personal, as though it had been carefully chosen. He reached forward and took the Fairium Z.

Solgaleo smiled and nodded. "Use them wisely. As for the others, you'll be taking them and searching for the pokemon - and humans - I've selected you to work with."

"Hang on… humans? Plural?" Macro blinked in bewilderment. "There's more than just Switch?"

Solgaleo nodded. "Yes. There is one more. You have not met them yet."

Macro's mind reeled back to Pulse City. DL leaning on the rail while they enjoyed ice cream, receiving a sudden update that a time pocket had been opened.

"So Socket doesn't have a human?" he asked. "Or are you asking me to get them from Meta City?" His voice wavered with the second question, and a wave of cold washed over him despite the warmth coming from the light.

"This human is not in Meta City," said Solgaleo. "They escaped from Socket, and have teamed up with a group of reliable pokemon. They are who you will be taking the Z Crystals to, amongst others. But fret not. You will know them when you meet them." As he listed each one, they floated up out of the box to hover above it. "Rockium Z, Flyinium Z, Waterium Z, Poisinium Z, Normalium Z, Fightinium Z, Psychium Z, Icium Z, Ghostium Z, Darkinium Z."

Macro stared at the hovering Z Crystals. So each one had its own designated owner, and he hadn't a clue who to deliver them to. He guessed the flying Z Crystal was for Switch, but as for the others… some mysterious human he'd not yet met and a whole load of other pokemon. Despite the mystery of it all, he felt a whole lot more comfortable knowing his small army had increased exceptionally in size.

Solgaleo waved a paw and Macro felt a small weight tug at his wrist. He lifted it to find a curved, stone bracelet fasted around it, complete with the Fairium Z. A quick look around told him his friends had received a similar surprise.

"These will contain your Z Crystals," said Solgaleo. "You can remove them if you wish. But take care not to lose them."

"So… I kinda want to practice this," said Macro.

"Same," said Anchor. "But… I'm a little exhausted. That was a lot of information to take all at once."

"Take your time," said Solgaleo. "These moves will take some getting used to. Rest first, then practice them."

"And we're meant to use these to get rid of those…" Macro waved a paw as he tried to remember the name. "Those Ultra Beasts?"

Solgaleo shook his head. "These moves will aid you in saving System, but those Ultra Beasts are not guilty. They're innocent victims. Living beings from another world. Your task is to get them back to their own worlds with as few casualties as possible. They will be volatile, and you will need to defend yourselves, even so far as to use your Z-Moves. But go with care."

Macro paled. How on earth were they meant to get volatile creatures into their own worlds without a means to open them up first?

"But…" he stuttered. "But we can't open time pockets."

"You will find a way," said Solgaleo.

"Huh." Matrix wound his antenna in his paw. "So I guess we have to capture BackDoor or one of those Zero Day things?"

Macro did not care for that idea, but he swallowed back a retort and examined the sparkling Z Crystal on his wrist.

"Like I said, go with care," said Solgaleo. "I now wish you a safe journey. But I give you one warning. Do not head back to Pulse City."

Macro looked up with a start, and Anchor let out a surprised 'what?'

"It is no longer a safe haven for you," said Solgaleo. "Socket has increased the reward for your detainment, Macro, not to mention the rest of your crew."

Anchor let out a surprised bark, almost knocking Matrix off his shoulder in the process.

"She has extended the reward to Pulse City," Solgaleo continued. "Even pokemon you thought were allies may well turn against you."

Macro suddenly felt very sick. His legs buckled again and he sank back to the floor. A wave of exhaustion took over him. Not again. What had he done this time?

"This increase is out of nothing more than spite and fear," Solgaleo explained. "But so long as you do not do anything reckless, it should be no trouble to you. There is another safe haven for you. You know it already. Head there."

"But what about DL?" Macro looked up at him. "We still have two more disks to find…"

"If DL still wishes to obtain Loop's memories, then by all means find them. They are in Botnet City and Meta City, the latter heavily guarded. But be warned that chasing down these disks will result in pain for the both of you."

Those words left a bad taste in Macro's mouth. He continued to stare up at Solgaleo, digesting what he'd just said. Everything. Everyone would be after him now. System was being ravaged by Ultra Beasts. And if he kept trying to help DL, then pain awaited the both of them.

He hoped desperately he could avoid that, or at least spare DL the pain.

"I never leave a job unfinished," he said.

Solgaleo nodded once. "That's noble of you. Until we meet again."

The world around them warped and Solgaleo faded away into the warm light. The light shrank down around them like a warm embrace, dazzling Macro's eyes so much he had to close them. It felt like he was being lifted, floating in a cozy cloud. When he opened his eyes again, he was lying on the floor of his ship, back in the cockpit.

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 49

A/N - Sorry for the small delay. We went away over the weekend. I need to try and make sure I proof and upload in advance in the future!

Sorry it's a short chapter. I considered merging it with the next chapter, but then it would have been over 8,000 words so… I am considering merging some shorter chapters as I find them, as I do feel 3000 is a little on the short side.

I'm also going to go back and fix the part about absolute zero in the previous chapter. It's been pointed out to me that in those temperatures things would theoretically just… stop moving!

…

Chapter Forty Nine

The small tympole ship drifted along the edge of the Dead Glacier, frost dusting its perspex windows. Surge had no idea how long she'd been drifting back and forth. The navigation screen beeped feebly as it tried to locate Macro's ship, but she was having no joy. Why she was even still bothering trying to find him she had no idea.

Her eyes went back to her computer for what must have been the tenth time in as many minutes. The news site was still open, still glaring at her with blinding intensity. Her face stared back out amid a sea of yellow, topped with a red 'wanted' sign. Beneath it, a prize. Fifty thousand credits. Half of what Socket had been offering her. Then there was Macro, updated, followed by each of his crew. Each one, fifty thousand credits. Their crime? Hacking government files and stealing government property.

And to top it all off, the prize was open to space pirates.

It didn't take a genius to work out that Socket was desperate. 'The scum of the skies'. 'The bane of her existence.'

Well, Surge wasn't heading back to Pulse City any time soon. She could bid her little apartment goodbye.

She sank into her seat with a groan and rubbed the bridge of her muzzle. What was she to do now? Where was she to even go? If she tried to join Macro, he'd be unlikely to welcome her with open paws. Especially after she'd threatened him. There was a bigger chance he'd see that poster then try to turn her in. He was still a space pirate. He still wanted money to survive in the skies. Fifty thousand credits could fuel his ship for two years and still leave him with enough to pay his crew. But would Socket merely reward him, pat him on the head and send him away with a clean slate? After years of trying to capture him? It was extremely unlikely.

And what about Surge? Would she find herself at the gothitelle's mercy if she still tried to hand over Macro? After her little stunt with the mayor, that was also very unlikely.

Surge flopped forward over her dashboard and rested her muzzle on her arms. Lost. Empty. Cold. Like a hollowed out rock.

Her eyes flitted over to her window, but she could see nothing in the vast darkness. Macro was long gone. If her calculations were right, he'd gone over the Dead Glacier. But why? Wouldn't he freeze? She knew full well if she'd gone over it, her little ship would freeze up with her inside it. She wouldn't survive the night. What was he after?

Her navigation system chirruped a little tune, snapping her out of her thoughts. A red dot blinked far to the east of her ship and she leapt over to it to get a better look. Her jaw fell open and she shook her head slowly. It couldn't be. If it were Macro, how had she missed it? It was as if the entire ship had materialised out of thin air one mile away from where she'd lost him.

She shook her head and trained her ship onto his. It was only when she was well on her way towards him she began to question her sanity.

…

Macro pushed himself up slowly and looked around at the cockpit. The rest of his crew were in a similar state. Cookie lay at his feet, shuddering and muttering as he looked around their surroundings. Anchor was silent, stroking his mohawk and exchanging baffled glances with Matrix. It was DL who was the first to speak.

"There's no frost on the windows."

Macro span his head around to look at her. She was sprawled over his chair, propping herself up on one arm, as she admired the windscreen.

"The crack has gone, too," she added.

Macro leapt to his feet then steadied himself with a paw on the back of his chair.

"Hang on." He brushed back a lock of black fur from his eyes. "What are you saying? Weren't we over the Dead Glacier?"

"I believe so," said DL. "But it's hard to say. There's no evidence we were even there."

Macro opened his mouth to reply, forgot every single word he wanted to string together, and instead said, "Wha'?"

DL shook her head slowly and absently pawed at her ear.

"Erm…" Anchor cleared his throat and rose to his feet. "Permission to be ridiculous, Cap'n?"

Macro sighed and waved a paw. "Go ahead."

"Is it at all possible," Anchor said slowly, "that we've all had the same dream?"

"I'm beginning to wonder." Macro hugged himself tightly and leant against his seat. "I mean… it's pretty common knowledge if you fly over the Dead Glacier, then you freeze to death." He paused and looked out the window. "But how?"

"I can suggest one solution," said Matrix. "There's every possibility that the huge creature… or Ultra Beast… that attacked the ship could have given off some kind of toxin that induced a synchronised dream or mass hallucination."

Macro jolted at the term 'Ultra Beast' and cast a wary glance over his shoulder at Matrix. The ribombee was pawing at something out of his line of sight that Macro assumed to be his computer.

"So that creature did this to us?" Macro asked.

"It's plausible, but I'm willing to rule it out."

"Why?" Macro frowned slightly.

"Because all those Z Crystals Solgaleo gave us are right here."

Macro span on the spot and looked down at the ribombee. What Macro had so quickly thrown aside as his computer turned out to be an open box revealing the collection of Z Crystals Solgaleo had given to them. It was only then that Macro felt the weight on his paw, and he lifted it up to his face. His eyes widened as he took in the Z Ring and the sparkling Fairinium Z reflecting back every light in the cockpit.

"This is all too much to take in," said Cookie. "Please excuse me. I'm going to go and cook things…"

Macro muttered an 'okay' to the slurpuff's retreating back, not taking his eyes off the Z Crystal.

"So, erm…" Anchor cleared his throat again. "It all actually happened?"

"Apparently." Macro lowered his paw and looked down at the box of crystals. "I… I have no idea what to make of all this."

"Then let's recap." Matrix sat back on one paw and used the other to twist his antenna. "We met with Solgaleo, who was in some kind of strange wormhole. He told us this BackDoor thing is releasing Ultra Beasts into System. They're a threat, and we're meant to round them up. But we're going to need help, which is why we have these Z Crystals."

That had all gone a little too fast for Macro. He looked from Matrix to the box and back and bit back the desire to ask him to repeat himself… slowly. The ribombee had already removed the blue Waterium Z from the box and was turning it around in his paw.

"Going off the number alone," he said, "it looks like we're meant to ask for a lot of help."

"Yeh, but who?" Macro crouched down before him and reached for the white Z Crystal. "The only normal type I know is Surge, but I can't see why it would be her. Besides, it will be too early whenever I see her again."

"Why?" Anchor and DL asked.

"I thought I'd already told you this," said Macro. "She tried to kill me."

Anchor's jaw went slack, and DL stared blankly at the mawile. A glimmer of anger flashed across her eyes and she diverted her gaze to the window.

"I know you said she'd tried to shoot you." Anchor brushed his mohawk back and sighed. "Guess I hadn't really processed it, huh?"

Macro snorted and continued fumbling through the Z Crystals. "I don't think I know any rock types, either. Or any others who can use these attacks." A long sigh left his throat and he lowered the Normalium Z back into the box. "Well, I'm at a loss."

"Give it time," said Matrix. "He said we'll know them when we meet them."

Macro gathered the long box and stood. "I'm going to guess one of these is for Switch. As for this other human and her allies… if she can shape shift like Switch, then she's gonna be really hard to find."

…

Annie sat up in her bed and sneezed. She scratched a claw under her reptilian nose and frowned at the dingy room.

"Huh. Is someone talkin' about me?" She yawned and curled back up into her pillow. "Whatever, I'll bite them later."

…

"Well." Anchor shrugged his shoulders. "Guess we'd better keep an eye open."

"And I guess we won't be going back to Pulse City," said Macro. "Wow, this is going to be really strange."

He tucked the crystals away into a drawer beneath the dashboard and turned to the rest of his crew. Anchor looked as lost as he felt, and Matrix was still sat on the floor. Macro blinked at the ribombee as he processed something he'd missed. His wings…

"When did your wings lose their frost bite?" he asked suddenly.

Matrix looked back at his wings as if for the first time and flexed them. "Oh… I hadn't noticed the feeling come back. Well, I guess I don't have to sit on the floor any more then, do I?"

He fluttered into the air and returned to his navigation screen.

Macro shook his head and looked around at the ship again. Matrix's wings, the crack in the windshield… Something truly amazing had happened. It both excited and terrified him.

Macro climbed into his seat beside DL and she fastened them both in.

"Where to, Cap'n?" Anchor asked.

Macro shrugged and bit his lip. "I've no idea. Maybe Cyan City?"

"Not a bad idea, if you ask me," said the granbull.

The giant schooling wishiwashi turned in the air as the navigation system locked them onto Cyan City.

"Erm, I think we might have one small problem," said Matrix. "We appear to have a stalker again, and they're gaining on us pretty quickly."

Macro raised his head to look out of the window. He couldn't see anything in the darkness, but his heart was hammering against his rib cage. A stalker… or a bounty hunter? It wasn't happening already, was it?

"Want me to fire on 'em?" Anchor asked.

"No." Macro shook his head. "Just get us away as fast as we can without hitting hyper drive. If they give us problems, then shoot them."

"Alrighty then."

Wildcard Gamma surged away from the Dead Glacier and trudged back towards the inhabited parts of System Sky. All the while, that red dot trailed after them, leaving a horrible taste deep in Macro's mouth.

…

Meta City felt heavy with static. Long coated pokemon traversing the streets had their fur fluff out dramatically and struggled to beat it back down. Frowns were thrown at the mechanical trees and profanities were muttered under breaths as the victims trotted away from the structures.

Deep in an alleyway, BackDoor drifted in the air upside down, his mitten paws tucked behind his head as he watched Zero Day at work. The static in the air made him feel wildly uncomfortable as it tingled his circuits, but he was too engrossed in the porthole that had opened conveniently out of sight of Meta City's prying eyes.

It had taken some work to lure the deranged fleet of porygon z away from the more inhabited areas. Zero Day had broken into smaller numbers and five of them had found themselves in Meta City. Whether or not they'd been spotted, BackDoor didn't really care. But Socket would, and he'd tried to keep damages to a minimum. That's why only a handful of pokemon had seen them. Only a couple of photos had been taken. Speculations would be made, propaganda would hit, then they'd be swatted aside as another conspiracy theory just like the Ultra Beast. Well… until the evidence was found. Where the rest of Zero Day had got to, he had no idea. And frankly, he couldn't care less.

The hoopa eyed the porthole curiously. He liked to believe he'd found it first, but Zero Day had been looking for something. Seemingly this particular porthole, going off their frantic behaviour. A couple of them fired pulses at it, their heads spinning as they sprayed binary taunts. BackDoor didn't know where the taunts had come from, or what they were aimed at. Perhaps they'd evolved a higher intelligence along with the ability to open up portholes. Breaking up to cover more distance did seem a rather advanced idea for a group of androids constructed merely to follow orders. Whatever it was that had happened to them, BackDoor was incredibly intrigued.

More static flooded from the porthole and the two porygon z closest to it staggered back, their pupils expanding and contracting dramatically. Their heads wobbled precariously and they span their legs in a bid to get away from the damaging electricity. It was certainly a bigger surge than the last time. Even BackDoor felt it, and he drifted a little higher out of the way until he felt its effects lessen off.

Strands of lightning shot out of the ultraviolet mist, lighting up the alley. It narrowly missed one of the porygon z as it swerved to the side, not taking its lifeless eyes off the porthole.

More electricity danced out from deep within, striking at random points and scattering Zero Day further into the alley. The area around the porthole strobed as each jolt gave off a brilliant flash of light. BackDoor righted himself and watched with fascination. His mechanical heart was doing somersaults, racing at a mile a minute and adding years to his artificial life. But he didn't care. All he wanted to know was what fantastic creature was going to leap out of the porthole.

It didn't take long for his answer to arrive. Lanky, black limbs stretched out amongst a torrent of electricity, a stark contrast to the vivid, bright lights that flowed from its wiry tendrils. But that's all it seemed to be. A wiry mass of tendrils creeping across the floor, each limb flopping over the next like an intoxicated arachnid. Then it separated into two and each one pushed itself up onto five limbs, topped with a head that looked like a jagged, static-filled fur ball. Electricity danced around their feet, catching in collected puddles where it erupted into deadly sparks.

BackDoor let out a single laugh and clapped his paws. "Amazing! These might be even cooler than that jellyfish thing!"

One of the creatures turned its head towards him, not that it had any eyes to speak of. It lifted one limb like an arm and fired out a string of electricity from its wiry fingers. BackDoor lurched to the side, shouting profanities, and came to a halt atop the roof of a bakery.

"Watch where you're firing at!" he scolded. "You almost shorted me!"

But the creature didn't respond. It turned and scurried off on two of its limbs, the others wiggling beside it like the arms of an excitable hatchling. The fifth limb waved behind it like a long tail, swishing side to side and toppling trash cans. The other creature didn't wait around for long. It sauntered off in a similar manner to the first one, then leapt over fallen obstacles as though its legs were made of springs.

BackDoor frowned and folded his arms. These creatures were impossible. How was he meant to control them when they kept attacking him? Electrical Ultra Beasts would make short work of him. One stray bolt and he'd be turned in for scraps before he could blink.

Zero Day looked equally as perplexed. But from the binary that filled BackDoor's head, they'd come to a similar conclusion. One of the porygon z drifted back to the porthole, its nose lighting up as it prepared itself to close it again. Before it could reach it, electricity engulfed the android and it let out a binary screech. BackDoor slammed his paws over his ears, but it was no use. The sound was completely in his head. An endless, agonised scream. Then it stopped as suddenly as it had started. He opened his eyes and looked down at the smoldering mass. The porygon z's eyes kept zooming in and out as it struggled to focus. The remaining Zero Day looked on at the porthole, their limbs slowly rotating back and forth. Their pupils had contracted into pinpricks, but they were silent.

Then another of those creatures came out of the porthole. Then another. Then another. Zero Day backed away, not taking their eyes off the slowly growing army.

Each creature stood like a tree, surveying its surroundings before taking off down the alley. Zero Day scattered, desperate to avoid the thin jolts of electricity that endlessly streamed from their bodies. Each movement seemed to generate it, and they danced down the scrawny tendons of their limbs like live wires.

Not one of them seemed to care about the porygon z that watched them like a hunter watches its prey. Then why had they attacked the one that had returned to close the porthole? Had they known? Had they wanted to enter this world?

BackDoor returned to hovering upside down, watching the creatures curiously. They broke off into three groups, each taking a different route in the alley. Their strange, faceless heads turned left and right, and they stretched out their wiry arms. Static danced across them, and all heads turned towards the mechanical trees. Their bodies went taught, then relaxed again, letting their tail-like limbs sway just above the floor. BackDoor couldn't help wondering if a silent decision had just been made.

A spray of binary filled BackDoor's mind and he quickly strove to decipher it. A war cry. One of the porygon z doubled back and launched a tri attack, knocking one of the creatures over. Then the porygon z returned to hover over its fallen comrade. The irreparable android smoldered beneath its feet, and the rest of Zero Day joined its side, their eyes lit up with the fire of battle.

The lanky creature quickly clambered back to its feet and rounded on the porygon z. It said something. Something BackDoor couldn't comprehend. It sounded like an electrical screech mutated into words. But the rest of the creatures understood it clearly. They gathered themselves and looked around at Zero Day. Even without facial expressions to go off, it was clear what they were thinking.

A threat.

Electricity flooded the alley, dancing up walls and trailing over moisture, engulfing anything that conducted it. Zero Day were drowned as it washed over their mechanical bodies.

BackDoor took that as a clear message to get out of there. With a flick of his paw, he vanished into the nearest transmission signal and sent himself back to the safety of System Sky.

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 50

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Fifty

The black market seemed a lot larger from Annie's current angle. She waddled through the crowds, holding her wings out at her sides awkwardly as she stretched up to her full height in a bid to see just a little bit higher. Only a couple of days ago, she'd borrowed Waveform's computer to do a little research on the extinct pokemon archeops. Allegedly it was meant to be around four foot seven inches tall. She wondered if that was either an over estimation, or from nose to tail, because she certainly wasn't standing four foot tall. The top of her head didn't even reach the decidueye's ribs.

"Grumble all you want," said Waveform. "You're the one who overslept and forgot to take your pills."

Annie bit her tongue and looked up at him with a frown. "I wasn't grumbling."

"You were, I heard you."

"That was my stomach." Annie fluffed out her feathers and looked over at the market stalls. "I'm hungry."

"Then you should have eaten your soup."

"It was gross! Like slimy slop!" She threw her claws into the air. "Besides, who has soup for breakfast?"

Web loomed over her and looked up at Waveform, who met the skuntank's gaze with a frown.

"Someone's clearly woken up on the wrong side of the nest," said Web. "Come on. Let's do what we came here to do then go and get

something to eat."

"Yes," said Annie. "Some proper breakfast. Good breakfast. Cereal or pastries or something." She shot Waveform a leer. "Not slop."

With that, Annie waddled through the crowd, shouting 'excuse me!' and 'oi! Watch the tail!' at the larger space pirates. One would have expected her to be stamped on, but the market's occupants threw her concerned or worried looks and stepped aside.

It was almost impossible to find what she was looking for. Somewhere in the market was a pokemon who specialized in 'distributing news'. Unfortunately, the species name wasn't one Annie was familiar with. When she'd asked N0ize for a description, he'd merely shrugged and said, 'I dunno. He's a bird.'

"Bird," Annie muttered to herself. "Feathers. A bird. With feathers."

As she strolled on, scanning over all the tables, the sentence lost all meaning and became more of a habit. The surrounding pokemon threw her questioning looks, but she wriggled past them and craned her reptilian neck as far as it would go. One of the tables was crowded, and plastered with posters. Some of them looked like wanted posters. Why would there be wanted posters for space pirates amongst… well… space pirates?

She narrowed her eyes at one, and a mawile leered back. Fifty thousand credits. How much was that in Sinnohan money?

The crowd parted just enough to reveal the vibrant body of a feathered pokemon. They were considerably smaller than Annie. Small enough to scurry around the table, shouting loudly and gesturing with a bright blue wing. Unlike most space pirates who wore a belt around their waist, he had a small pouch strapped to his scaly, right leg. Although it looked much too small to fit anything in. Atop their black head was a tuft of feathers that looked like they'd been chewed away, resembling a mangled musical note.

Annie's eyes widened. A bird. With feathers. One she did actually recognise from a book she'd been forced to read called 'Perappu Says'.

She strutted over to the stall, forced herself between a rhydon and a scyther, and placed her wing claws on the table. Her eyes went to the posters again and she tugged one free and stuffed it unceremoniously into her bag. The vibrant bird paused mid-sentence to cast her a curious glance. He froze with his wing still spread, and his hooked beak flapped open and closed like a beached fish.

"I think you're who I'm looking for," said Annie. "Do you specialise in 'sending out information'?" She raised her claws for air quotes.

The bird didn't say anything. He continued to stare at her, still unwilling to lower his wing. His eyes then went to the top of her head, and Annie found herself drowned by a large shadow. She craned her neck around to look up at Waveform.

"So you found him," he said. "Pretty good for someone who hasn't a clue what a chatot is."

The parrot pokemon blinked and finally folded his wing neatly at his side.

"Well," he said. "I guess we're even, since I have no idea what you are."

"I'm Annie," she said. "I'm guessing you're… wait… I've got this." She scratched her chin with a claw and looked up at the ceiling.

"Name's Hatter," said the chatot. "Pulse City's very own Information Acquisition and Distribution Entrepreneur. And I'm afraid I have quite the queue so you'll have to wait a while."

Annie's lip curled and she pulled her head back slightly. "A what?"

"It's all fancy talk," said Waveform. "He's a spy."

She let out a long 'ohh'.

Hatter strutted away, commencing his talk once more. It sounded more like the shouts of someone trying to drum up a sale.

Annie leant forward and tapped a claw on the table. "Oi! Oi, bird! We can pay you!"

Hatter turned back to her and fluffed out his chest. "I have a name. Besides, you have to pay me. I don't work for free." He turned away from her and fired a sneer over his shoulder. "Now wait your turn!"

Annie bristled and cast a glance up to Waveform. The decidueye rolled his eyes and reached into his wing, fixing his finger-like feathers over one of his arrows.

She reached up her claws and placed them on his wing, freezing him in an instant. His crimson eyes widened for the briefest moment and locked onto hers. She gave him a playful grin and leant back across the table.

"Oi! Hatter! I ain't done with you!" She reached out her claws and grabbed the chatot by his tail.

A loud squawk flew from his beak and he flapped his wings frantically as she dragged him backwards across the table.

The large pokemon surrounding her leapt into action, drawing lasers and raising fists encased in gauntlet-like weapons. Hot beams erupted from the lasers, narrowly skimming Annie's feathers. She leapt aside with a yelp, bringing Hatter up to her face as a meat shield. He screamed as a laser brushed his wing, searing away a couple of primaries.

Waveform leapt before her, tugging out one of his vines to fire off his arrows, but Annie beat him aside with her wing while clutching the flailing chatot in the claws of the other. As she swung back her free wing, rocks erupted into the air and hovered precariously. Stray laser

beams collided with them and evaporated harmlessly, leaving the rocks completely unscathed. The space pirates glanced from the rocks to her, still clutching their weapons.

"Annie!" Web's voice cut through the sudden silence.

A column of flames shot over the crowd, narrowly missing Waveform's head. He ducked aside and quickly re-aimed his arrow at the small crowd gathering behind Hatter's unimpressed clients.

Several of the space pirates span on the spot to aim their weapons at their assailant. Web ducked a brown laser beam then skidded to a halt between Trojan and Zip. The latter let out a nervous squeak and skittered aside to dodge a sparking flurry of electricity. Behind them, Annie could just make out Tracer and N0ize. The delphox had his stick raised, ready to launch another attack.

"Oh no you don't," said Annie slowly. "I'd drop your weapons if I were you. All of you." She lifted the terrified chatot to her face and smirked. "Besides. I think y'all are gonna like what I've got to tell you."

Hatter's eyes lingered over the hovering rocks before the archeops. A strange glow radiated from them in a manner the whole crowd deemed threatening. Annie merely smirked at her audience and lifted the chatot even higher. His wings flailed helplessly against her feathers as he desperately tried to right himself.

"Go on then!" one of the space pirates roared. "What've you got to tell us that involves holdin' our main source of 'secret' information hostage?"

Annie's eyes widened and she nodded to the chatot. "I ain't holdin' him hostage. I'm borrowin' him."

Pokemon from across the market slowly trudged over to the crowd, keeping a watchful eye on Annie while their paws clutched their holstered weapons. While many pirates less inclined to get involved

made for the exit, a lot more watched from a safer distance, as taut as coiled springs.

Waveform ducked towards her slightly but he didn't take his eyes off the frightened and angry space pirates. "Get to the point."

"You see. I'm here to make a difference." Annie gestured with the flapping pokemon still clutched between her claws, and placed her other wing on her hip. "Where I come from, pokemon don't eat meat. Gotta say that sickened me when I found out about it. Could one of you nice space pirates please tell me how exactly you fish them up?"

The crowd became a mixture of twisted sneers and frightened eyes. One of the gruffer looking ones - a sandslash with icicles for armour - looked her in the eye.

"We use nets." His raspy voice created a fine mist in the warm air. "Electrified nets to stun 'em."

"Hmm. Seems rather barbaric." Annie glanced up at the ceiling and stroked her chin with a claw. "Don't they scream?"

The sandslash shrugged, as did most of her audience.

"We cancel out the noise with earplugs and headphones," a female voice explained.

Annie snapped her attention back to the audience, spotting the speaker immediately. A yellow and black head poked above the smaller members of the crowd. Ampharos, if she guessed correctly. An electric type.

Electric nets.

So they trapped the fish, electrocuted them, and couldn't even hear their screams? She glanced down at the parrot in her grasp. He stared back out at the crowd, drooling slightly. Well, at least he'd stopped flapping about.

"Yanno what?" She turned back to the space pirates. "I think I need to introduce you to someone. Oi! Little fish!"

The crowd fell silent as mechanical creaks rose into the air. Pokemon leapt aside as Zip slowly crept through the crowd, cautiously watching them as though he was scared they were going to pluck him from his bowl and swallow him in one bite. Looks of disgust and anger crossed their faces, but no one said a word.

"Go on," Annie told him. "Introduce yourself to these nice space pirates."

"Erm." Zip released his controls and turned in the water to look at the sceptical audience. "I'm Zip. Annie rescued me when I escaped from a fishery."

Those angry looks melted away as the crowd stared back at Zip. Jaws went slack, while others tensed and looked away.

"We don't like being eaten," Zip told them. "I tried to beg for my life while a scyther tried to cut me up. But he wouldn't listen. Or couldn't, through his huge headphones. I was lucky enough to escape with my life."

The space pirates looked on in stunned silence, although a couple of them broke away to move into the market. The ampharos had turned deathly pale. She span on the spot and vomited audibly onto the floor. The sandslash leapt aside with a squeak.

"I'd never even spoken to a land pokemon before then," Zip went on. "I didn't think anyone would listen. Then I met Annie and the rest of my friends, and they showed me not all land pokemon want to eat me! In fact, they want to help me!"

The small crowd exchanged glances, muttering amongst themselves. The ampharos looked back up at Zip and wiped a paw across her mouth.

"Are you going to help me?" Zip asked them.

"I… I used to be vegan." The sandslash diverted his gaze to the wall. "But money got pretty tight, you know?"

"I don't know if I can handle this," said the ampharos. "I need a lie down."

Annie placed both wings on her hips and frowned. "You can have a lie down when you've told me why y'all are actin' like you didn't even know fish could speak!"

"I-it's not like we didn't know." The ampharos couldn't even look at her. "In my job, we're told not to speak to them. To not even listen to them. We're given equipment that cancels out their voices. You see… they tell us the sound of a dying fish pokemon is deafening, and that they're persuasive and will lure us into the water. So we have to protect our ears."

Annie creased her muzzle. "Sounds like a load of baloney."

The ampharos shrugged weakly and looked away. "It's protocol."

"Ba-lo-ney!" Annie crossed her arms and looked at the rest of the crowd. "So. Whatcha all gonna do? Help us out, or keep on fishin'?"

A few of the remaining space pirates turned angry again, and a gabite flexed his claws as he sneered at her.

"Is that why you're here?" he scoffed. "To bring this little runt along and convince us to stop eatin' meat?"

Annie shrugged and shook her head. "That's not the only reason. It ties into my big reason, see. You know that mayor who bosses us all about? She's the big cheese around here, right?"

"Not here she ain't," said the gabite.

"No?" Annie looked up at Waveform who shook his head. "Oh, fair enough. But she's mayor of System. She makes the rules. She tells you that you can eat fish, so you eat fish. Well… she's the reason I'm here. Not here in Pulse City, but here in this weird, polluted place you still call System. Air is rancid. Pokemon don't get along. You fly around in these fish-shaped ships, yet you happily eat them off your plates! Well, what if I told you it ain't all roses and wildflowers?"

The angry pirates returned to looking stunned. And somewhat confused.

"You see, that mayor of yours pulled me right out of my own time-line," Annie went on. "'Course, I weren't happy there. I spent my days sat in a cell changing form back and forth. Sure, Socket gave me magic pills and I can stand before you as an archeops rather than yo-yo-ing like some kinda circus freak. Then we've got some monster flying around destroying cities. What part of this sounds like a conspiracy to you?" She stretched out both claws to make her point, Hatter swinging like a pendulum. "I show up, monster shows up. This is her doing. What is she up to exactly?"

"Wait a minute." The gabite was oddly talkative. "You're tryin' to tell us that Socket pulled you from another time-line? How exactly did she do that?"

"She used a Time Onion," Annie said flatly.

The dragon rolled his eyes and looked back at the rest of the space pirates.

"I think this bird's got a screw loose," he said.

"She's a jackin' archeops!" Trojan shouted from behind them. "Aren't they meant to be extinct? Use your brains!"

Annie looked out at the space pirates and grinned widely. The looks of confusion and anger had melted away once more, replaced instead by fear and realisation.

"You got a bone to pick with anyone, pick it with Socket," she said. "I'm gonna go and spread this message throughout System." She nodded at the dazed chatot. "We'll see what colour that mayor really is."

The large rocks she'd been holding in the air rained down like an avalanche, shaking the market's foundations. The pirates ducked and raised their paws as dust trickled from the old rafters.

Giving Waveform a pat on the back, she hopped over the rocks and strolled towards the exit, letting him sandwich Zip between the two of them. The crowd parted, keeping their eyes on her and her odd, aquatic friend. A few of them muttered amongst themselves, aiming leers at the archeops and drawing their weapons, but they didn't pursue. Too stunned by her story, unnerved by her ancient power, or wanting to avoid accidentally killing their 'bringer of secret news and high-paying jobs'.

"Well," she said as she rejoined the rest of her crew. "I don't know about you lot, but I think that went rather well."

"Are you insane?" Tracer gasped, flashing a glance back towards the muttering crowd. "You're going to start an uproar."

"Of course," said Annie. "That's part of starting a rebellion. First everyone gets angry about something, then they rebel!"

Tracer let out a groan and placed a paw over his face. "What are you doing?"

"Starting a rebellion," Annie said, pointlessly.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'm kinda curious," said Widget.

"That makes most of us." Trojan looked down at Annie's claws. "What exactly do you plan to do with that pirate?"

"Get him to spread a message," said Annie. "All he has to do is tell each and every city in System exactly what Socket is up to."

"But we don't know what she's up to," moaned Tracer. "We don't even know why she dragged you out of your own time-line."

Annie looked up at him and shrugged. "So? She wants to stick me back in a lab. She likely unleashed that monster thing. I'd say she's not a very good mayor, wouldn't you?"

"But without any evidence-"

"I'm evidence!" Annie thumped herself in the chest. "Besides. You're a detective, right? If you want more evidence, get researchin'. We'll show the whole of System what a rubbish mayor this Socket is."

Tracer stared down at her, his paws and ears twitching. For a moment, she thought he'd broken into a sweat. N0ize erupted with deep laughter and smacked the delphox hard on the back.

Widget looked between them then locked eyes with Annie. "Rubbish mayor, eh? I've been saying that for years."

…

Outside was sheer madness. Tentacled beasts clambered up Meta City's mechanical trees, electricity dancing from their bodies and striking the terrified pokemon below. The streets were swiftly emptying as pokemon fled back to their homes, or from the city altogether.

Socket watched, her mouth wide open in a silent scream, as the mechanical trees failed under the beasts' attacks. Yellow air flowed in from the outskirts, billowing in a victory dance over the trees' defeat. Electrical monstrosities clambered over buildings, attaching themselves to air filters and dangling from street lamps.

BackDoor.

That notorious android had to have something to do with this.

Socket tore herself from the living nightmare and brought up her holoscreen. Before she could even dial out to BackDoor it began ringing, the dancing cartoon phone filling the screen.

She clenched her teeth together and answered, silently willing it to be a useful call and not a panicked Meta City resident.

Yobi's panicked face appeared before her, his ears trembling and his paws free from any tinkering tools.

"M-Madam Mayor," he sputtered. "I… I think-"

She raised her paw to silence him. "I am assuming you've seen what's going on outside?"

"Yes," he said, trying to gather himself. "I think-"

"Is it that disobedient creation of yours?" she demanded.

Before he could answer, she dialled out to BackDoor. The screen split in two, ringing away. Yobi glanced sideways as though he was trying to see the dialling animation. A painful five seconds passed before BackDoor graced the segment with his grinning face.

"Socket!" he laughed. "What can I do for you?"

The gothitelle waved a paw towards the window, and the hoopa's eyes went to the scene. His face split into another grin and he clapped his mitten paws together.

"I see those Ultra Beasts have made themselves right at home!" he said.

Yobi's face paled, and Socket's ribbons stood on end.

"This isn't their home!" she snapped. "What are they doing here?! Why have you let them out?!"

"Me?" BackDoor feigned innocence and placed a paw on his chest. "It wasn't me who did it. It was Zero Day."

"Zero Day can't open dimensional gates," said Yobi. "I didn't program that ability into them."

"Well, it was them." BackDoor drifted upside down and tucked his paws behind his head. "I watched them do it."

"If you watched them do it, then you could have stopped them," said Socket.

BackDoor shrugged. "I wasn't gonna get in the way of those creatures. I watched them fry any porygon z that tried."

Yobi leant forward on his desk, looking in BackDoor's direction. "So Zero Day were destroyed?!"

"Not all of them." The hoopa yawned. "They've split up into little groups."

Yobi fell back into his seat and his jaw went slack. Socket looked from him to the android and back.

"I'm getting the impression this is unexpected behaviour?" she said.

"Yes…" Yobi scratched behind his ear and glanced away from her. "I'm not sure what's going on…"

"BackDoor." Socket snapped her head back around to the android, still drifting upside down with his eyes closed. And was he humming? She frowned and folded her arms, tapping her claws along her fur. "I want you back in Meta City. Round up these creatures before they destroy everything!"

BackDoor cracked one eye open. "You want me to deal with your problem?"

"Is it beyond your capabilities?" she asked. "You can open these gateways. We can't."

"No can do, love."

Socket's spine stiffened and she stared at the android, aghast. He chuckled at her expression and closed his eyes again.

"I won't go anywhere near those things," he said. "I don't want my circuits fried."

Socket seethed and she took a step towards the holoscreen. "This city is swiftly being destroyed! I demand that you do it!"

"Really?" BackDoor's eyes snapped open and he stared straight at her, chilling her through to her bones.

A deep humming filled the room and she felt herself being dragged backwards. She looked over her shoulder, straight into spinning ultraviolet mist. Then another opened beside her, then another at the far end of the room. She felt her ears dragged towards the ceiling and her eye went to yet another spinning below her ceiling fan. Each portal tugged at her, increasing in intensity. She span to grab hold of her desk, but every joint in her body felt like it was being pulled apart. A shrill scream escaped her throat and she reached across her desk to secure her grip.

"What are you doing?!" she screeched at the holoscreen. "Close them! Close them, now!"

She heard BackDoor yawn loudly. "No. I think I'll leave them right there."

"Okay!" she gasped. "Okay, you can leave the ones in Meta City! We'll have Zero Day close them! Just… get these things out of my office!"

"Alright, alright, fine." He sighed and one by one each of the portholes closed with a nauseating sucking sound. "Well, I think you've learned your lesson."

She looked over her shoulder at BackDoor's jovial face, contrasting wildly with Yobi's stunned silence.

"Zero Day are the ones that did it," said BackDoor. "So they can deal with it. Not. My. Problem." He waved, an action submerged in a mask of innocence. "Bye bye!"

His half of the screen blinked out, allowing Yobi to take over it. Socket stared back at the raichu, her chest still heaving as she tried to calm her blazing nerves.

"I don't know what's going on." He answered her unasked question. "Zero Day can now open gateways, and BackDoor's behaviour… I think they might be out of control."

Socket smoothed down her fur and leant back against her desk. Her eyes flit around the room, checking for any remaining pockets.

"You don't say?" she said. "What could have caused that?"

Yobi shrugged and looked down at his desk, absently running one paw over his arm. "I… I don't know. But I think we might have to shut them down. Postpone our plan until we've got them back under control."

"Postpone our plan?!" Socket gasped.

"I'm afraid so." Yobi glanced back up at her then back at the table. "If they're out of control, then they pose a threat to System, and to us."

Socket tapped her foot on the floor and looked over her shoulder at the window. Those electrical creatures. The rapidly discolouring air. She could already smell it drifting through her air filter. She reached across her desk to switch the filter on before turning back to Yobi.

"How do you plan on doing this?" she asked.

"I can create another virus," he explained. "One that can deactivate every android in the BackDoor network. If I had more time, I could create one that would give me remote access and direct them back to me, which would save time in rounding them up. But a program like that is complex… if you're wanting a faster approach-" He looked up to see Socket's nod. "Then I'll need to deactivate them and hunt around System to find them. Collect as many as I can and re-program them back to factory settings."

"That could take months, if not years. How about just one Zero Day model?"

Yobi scratched behind his ear and 'hmm'd'. "I suppose I could do that, but it might be a little more complex. I'd need to get it to just one model, and that won't be easy. Maybe if I just hunted one down-"

"Then do it quick," she said. "I want to leave this place before it gets any more toxic."

…

Defrag leant back in her seat as she sipped a steaming cup of tea. Both feet lay across her desk and one of them bobbed back and forth to the deep beat of the music blaring from her computer's old speakers. As another tune cut through it, her eyes snapped open and tea sloshed over her chest. She yelped and placed the tea down with a clatter, reaching first for the box of tissues before grabbing her phone. She shot Tracer's name a venomous glare then answered it.

"Yes, Tracer?" she muttered as she dabbed at her fur.

"Are you all right, Defrag?" he asked quickly.

"Yes, just a little wet." She paused and narrowed her eyes. "Why? Shouldn't I be?"

"Oh no, you just sound stressed. Anyway, I have a little job for you."

She sat bolt upright, kicking her feet back to the ground. "A job?"

"Yes. Could you please contact Surge?"

Her heart plummeted and she sank back into her seat. "I thought she had a job with the mayor?"

"That's exactly why I need you to contact her," he said quietly. "Tell her we'll pay her double what Socket is. All I need her to do is find out exactly why Socket wants a human, and if she's responsible for that monster."

"Plural."

"Pardon?"

"I said plural." Defrag retrieved her keyboard and turned on her screen. Meta City News was still loaded, filled with ominous photos. "There's been an outbreak of monsters in Meta City. They're draining the city's electricity supply by attaching themselves to the air filters."

She could practically hear Tracer gasp and stutter as he struggled to find words.

"The infestation is bad, too," Defrag went on. "More and more monsters are showing up by the hour. It's only a matter of time until those trees give up and Meta City shares the very same air as us."

"Have they…" He paused to clear his throat. "Have they found out where they're coming from?"

"Yes. Apparently they're coming through some kind of porthole," Defrag explained. "They've also found the remains of destroyed robots in that very same area. Something from the old Porygon line, they believe. But it's difficult to tell which exactly from the burnt and melted remains. Socket has said they were sent in to try and close the porthole secretly, so as not to create an uproar, while her

scientists deal with the threat. She claims to know nothing about it, but that there seems to be an outbreak of dimensional gateways opening across System and letting in what she's dubbed Ultra Beasts."

Tracer was silent as he took this in.

"You still want me to contact Surge?" Defrag asked.

"Socket obtained a human," he said. "A human that claims to be from a different time-line. And you're telling me she's calling these anomalies 'Dimensional Gateways'?"

Defrag scrolled through the interview. "That's what it says here."

"I have my doubts," said Tracer. "Contact Surge and ask her to keep an eye open. Quiz her on everything she knows. Call her back to the office if you need to."

"Fine. I'll do just that."

"Tell me exactly what she says," he went on. "And if you find out anything else, tell me. Don't delay."

"You got it."

"Take care, Defrag. Let's hope those things in Meta City stay there." He hung up.

Defrag let out a long sigh and let her arm flop over the arm of her chair. The article stared back at her, depicting a clear image of one of those strange, electrical monsters.

More desk work. And, by the sounds of it, Surge would get all the fun.

She lifted up her phone and dialled the zigzagoon's number. As it rang out, a soft scratching sound filled the office. She turned in her seat to face it, the phone still pressed to her ear. A shadow passed

beyond the mucky window. Probably some little goon looking in again. She frowned and turned away, but it moved once more. Jagged limbs stuck out in an almost perfect star shape. It hovered there for a moment, then turned and took off towards the sky.

Defrag stared at the window, her heart racing. Her mouth hung open as she tried to catch her breath.

"… Hello? Defrag?"

Surge's voice snapped her back to reality and she took a few deep breaths to steady herself.

"Oh, Surge. Sorry… I…" She shook her head sharply. "Bad connection."

Surge was quiet for a moment. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes." Defrag turned her chair fully from the window and brought up the Meta City News main page. "I'm just ringing to pass on a message, really. Tracer has a job for you."

"Well, that couldn't have come at a better time." Surge chuckled dryly. "I've just been fired from my old one."

Defrag felt her heart sink again and she released her computer mouse. "I'm not sure how much use you'll be then. He wants you to spy on Socket and see what she's up to."

"Explain."

"You've probably heard about this already, but apparently strange 'Dimensional Gateways' are opening across System, releasing monsters into our world."

"Oh. That." She chuckled again. "I know all about that, hon."

"Seriously?" Defrag raised an eyebrow. "What did Socket hire you for?"

"To take out that nuisance Hunter. He's been all up in her plans lately." Surge laughed again, but it didn't sound remotely jovial. "And so have I. You even seen the news? Check out the wanted posters."

Defrag hesitated for a moment, then opened the news site's Most Wanted link. There, right at the top, were Hunter and the rest of Wildcard Gamma. But beside them was a smiling picture of Surge. All of them were wanted for fifty thousand credits.

Defrag bit her lip and leant back in her seat again. "What did you do?"

"Let's just say I know everything about these 'Dimensional Gateways'." Surge paused, and Defrag thought she heard her smile. "So… what do you need to know?"

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 51

A/N - Thanks for all faves, reviews and follows! =D A bit of a longer chapter today. I hope you enjoy!

Chapter Fifty One

Floating cities drifted by on the horizon as Wildcard Gamma moved swiftly through the inhabited areas of System Sky. Macro leant on the dashboard, struggling to keep his eyes open. He yawned widely and watched one of the cities draw closer to his ship. Which one it was, he had no idea at this distance. But it wasn't their destination, that much he knew.

The clatter of a mug appearing beside him snapped him out of his daze, and he looked down at a steaming mug of coffee.

"I really think you could use some sleep," DL told him as she released the handle.

He took the mug in both paws before it slid off the dashboard to meet an unfortunate fate on the cockpit floor.

"I'm not sleeping until we're back in civilization," he told her.

"We are." She placed her paws on her hips and frowned. "So get some sleep. You're of no use to anyone the state you're in now."

"Coffee and some fresh air and I'll be right as rain." He sipped at his coffee and immediately regretted it as it burnt his lips. He set it back down quickly and whisked a paw across his mouth. "Besides, I'm not going to sleep while Ultra Beasts are wreaking havoc in my home."

"It could take months to sort this out!" she gasped. "Get some rest."

He waved a paw at the windows and looked at her pointedly. "We'll get my ship somewhere safe, then I'll sleep. 'Kay?"

The pachirisu rolled her eyes and gazed out of the window. "Fine. But this macho attitude of yours isn't doing anyone any favours."

"Macho?" He narrowed his eyes as he took another - more cautious - sip of coffee.

"Yes. You think you're stronger than you are." She picked up a tray he'd failed to notice and made her way out of the cockpit. "You're just another pokemon like the rest of us. And, just like the rest of us, you need sleep."

Macro watched her go, still clutching the hot coffee in his paws. With a sigh, he turned back to the window and slowly sipped his drink.

The cockpit was oddly quiet. Anchor had gone for a lie down, and Matrix had decided to take a break and play some video games in his room.

Macro didn't like to leave the cockpit empty, but DL was right. He did need sleep.

He placed his mug carefully on the dashboard, then let his head fall onto his arms as he sprawled across it. As soon as he closed his eyes, all he could see were distorted monsters. Blurry shapes that manifested into otherworldly creatures. Then that screaming bamboo face filled his vision. Its unearthly voice wailing through his mind.

His eyes snapped open again and he found himself trying to catch his breath. That beast had got to him. It was enough to make him miss his fiery nightmares.

A light paw fell on his shoulder and he glanced to the side, meeting DL's gentle face. The warmth in her eyes chased away those frightening cobwebs and he lifted his head slightly to get a better look at her.

"I can take over in here," she said. "Go on. Bed."

"You know," he said as he pushed himself up. "That doesn't sound like a terrible idea."

"Glad to know I've got through to you."

She stood aside as he clambered off his chair, then immediately pulled herself up into it.

"I might only nap for an hour or so," he said. "I don't think we're too far from Cyan City."

"Take as long as you need."

She didn't even look back at him. Somehow, that stabbed at his chest. He shook it off and reached into his pouch for his computer. At least he could get some reading done and catch up on things before letting sleep take over. Clear his mind.

As he left the room, he looked down at the screen. It was already lit up, showing the main page of Meta City News. His breath flew out of his lungs and he staggered into the wall. Wide, frantic eyes lingered over the screen as he tried to take it in.

Strange, black and white creatures clambered over buildings and the mechanical trees. Their bodies discharged electricity, engulfing those unfortunate enough to get too close. The headlines claimed they sucked electricity out of anything that produced it. The mechanical trees were twisted and broken beyond repair, allowing putrid air to enter Meta City.

His computer clattered to the floor, landing with the screen face up. Still broadcasting the horrific news. He slid down the wall but before he hit the floor he found himself caught in DL's arms. She lowered him to the floor and sat down beside him, her entire body trembling. But somehow she managed to maintain her composure as she read over the nightmarish news.

"They're going to be everywhere, aren't they?" she said. "It makes me wonder how many there are, and how dangerous they really are."

Macro's eyes flitted towards her, but words failed to form. What did she mean? Surely those pictures alone showed how dangerous they are? Hadn't that jellyfish killed other pokemon? That strange bamboo monster almost took out Wildcard Gamma!

The antenna behind her ear began to flash sporadically and her eyes went distant. Macro felt his heart sink, but the blank look in her eyes was fleeting.

"I'm getting a message," she said.

"Ignore it."

His voice came out strained, and he stared at her, silently pleading. But she took no notice. She just stared down at his computer, not seeing it, as she retreated into her own head.

No. He wasn't having any of this BackDoor nonsense. Not on top of everything else.

His breath came in quick, shallow bursts and his eyes flickered towards the back of her head. He could stop it. He could stop BackDoor's interference with his life. All he had to do was flick that switch.

He raised a trembling paw towards the base of her skull.

"It's not off BackDoor." She released him and reached for the computer. "Where's the jack cable?"

Macro let his paw fall weakly onto his lap and he leant against the wall, watching DL as she scrambled around the cockpit. His head rolled back, stopped only by the cold wall, and he let out a strangled

sob. Had he seriously tried to do that? To switch her off? She was a living pokemon, just like him. It was monstrous to even consider it.

Tears stung his eyes, threatening to leak out, and he clasped both paws over his face to stifle them. Or hide them. He felt too weak to hold them in.

"I've found it," said DL. "I just have to download some data."

Her words barely registered. He raked his claws over his face and took in a few deep breaths, but nothing could shake that dark cloud. That horrible realisation he'd just tried to get rid of her. Switch her off like some machine. He didn't even know what damage that could do now she had her memories. Would she lose them? Revert back to a mindless computer? It didn't bare thinking about.

Silence filled the cockpit, the only sounds his frantic breathing. He cracked his claws and peered through them. DL sat beside him with the jack lead in the back of her skull. The other end was in the bottom of his pocket computer. Her antenna flickered rhythmically, but she appeared as alert as ever, watching the screen patiently. Then she lifted a paw and removed the jack lead.

Macro lowered his paws and stared at her with his mouth open. He took a few breaths to steady himself, and she looked up at him with a smile.

"Done," she said. "I think you might appreciate this."

"I thought you… I dunno… went dormant when you had a jack cable in?"

She shrugged and retrieved his computer. "You're usually downloading things to me at the time. I guess it's different when I'm downloading data to a computer."

He took another deep breath and pushed himself up, but he still felt weak. Guilty. Wretched.

"What did you do?" he asked.

"I got a message from Solgaleo," she explained. "He sent me a data file containing information on all the Ultra Beasts. He called it an UltraDex."

Macro sank back against the wall.

Solgaleo…

Solgaleo could send her data?

Of course he could. He'd been contacting Macro for days prior to reaching the Dead Glacier. Through dreams, sun-like images, and through a message on his computer no one else could see.

Macro grit his teeth together and screwed his eyes shut, letting out a strangled sob.

"Macro, are you okay?" DL asked.

He shook his head violently. "I… I thought it was BackDoor. I tried to switch you off…" His voice trailed off, but he dared not look at her. "You're not just some machine, DL. Especially not to me. I don't know what got into me. I… I'm terrified."

He heard her shift, every movement tearing at his heart as he pictured her leaving the room.

"I think everything's got on top of me," he choked out. "What's happening to my home?"

DL scooped an arm under his and gently lifted him to his feet. He opened his eyes and looked down at her, but she wasn't looking at him. It pained him. He'd done it again. He'd hurt her.

He closed his eyes again and leant against her as she walked him from the cockpit.

"I'm sorry," he choked. "I'm a real-"

"If you call yourself a jerk I'm gonna pour that coffee over your head." She shook her head and sighed. "It's understandable you'd be scared, Macro. I could easily have been assaulted by BackDoor, and if it did do anything… untoward… to me, then I'd want you to switch me off."

"I will never do that to you."

"If it was to save my life, or yours, or anyone on this ship, I'd want you to."

Macro stiffened and glanced at her. But she still wasn't looking at him. She stopped outside a door and he realised they'd reached his room. A quick flick of her paw opened the door and she steered him inside.

"Get yourself settled down," she said softly. "I'll be back shortly with a cocoa."

He watched her leave, then climbed onto his bed, sitting hunched on top of his duvet. He didn't want to climb under it. Didn't want to sleep. His mind was a swirling mess and guilt still gnawed at him.

He looked around for his computer, but it was nowhere to be found. Maybe DL still had it? He sighed and leant back on his paws, looking up at the bare ceiling. Those wiry monsters were still clear in his mind, dragging down the mechanical trees and causing havoc in Meta City. He hoped desperately the city would be okay. He might not care for Socket, those monsters were mainly her fault, but there were still innocent pokemon living there. Innocent pokemon having their lives ruined by rampaging Ultra Beasts. Creatures they knew nothing about. Creatures that couldn't be controlled or communicated with.

And it was all linked to BackDoor.

His mind went back to DL and he grimaced, trying to force the guilt away. But it was no use. It ate away at him.

The door hissed open and DL strolled in carrying two steaming mugs. A familiar, spicy smell filled his room as the door closed, trapping the steam inside.

"I made us occa cocoa." She gave him a small smile. "I thought it might help you sleep."

He took one of the mugs, not taking his eyes off her. She set the other one on his bedside unit then perched on the edge of his bed.

"Scooch," she said.

His mind whirled with a new kind of confusion but he obeyed, edging along enough to allow her to sit beside him. She adjusted his two pillows against the wall and leant back, reaching into her pouch and pulling out his computer.

"What are you doing?" he finally asked.

"We're going to look at this stuff Solgaleo sent us," she explained. "He said it might help us to put things into perspective. Especially as we'll be rounding those Ultra Beasts up."

She loaded up the file and a little animation played across the screen. Some kind of blue and silver ball spun in the centre of the screen before it split in two like doors opening. A list of names filled the screen, each one numbered from one to eleven. The top one was Nihilego, which Macro instantly recognised.

"Let's start with this one." DL tapped the creature's name and brought up a new display.

This one showed the creature in a little box, which changed at regular intervals to display it in different positions. Beside it's picture

was it's typing. Rock and poison. Just like a pokemon, it had it's own type.

Macro leant over her shoulder to read the description.

'Nihilego, also known as 'Symbiont', is an Ultra Beast that resides in a dimension called Deep Sea. It produces a neurotoxin to control other creatures, making them do its will. It can also control inanimate objects. Creatures and objects under its control often react in a violent way, but this is believed to be the creature's way of defending itself. It will often resort to violence if it feels it's suffering.

'When it's not reacting in a volatile manner, it behaves in a very innocent manner. As it drifts around in its own environment it moves in an almost hypnotic fashion. It cannot survive for long outside of toxic air.'

"Sounds like it would be right at home in Proxy City," said Macro.

"It also might explain its volatile manner while it was flying around System Sky," said DL. "But it makes me wonder how long it can survive outside of toxic air, given it was in System for quite some time."

Macro shrugged. "Even though they cleaned up the air, we're still polluting it. Maybe it was enough to sustain it for a little while."

"Maybe." She sipped at her cocoa then tapped on another name. "Let's look at this one."

The next Ultra Beast looked like a large, muscular insect. The one following it was a lot more feminine. Macro wondered if they were from the same world, despite the different location names. When they got to the next one, Macro almost spilt his cocoa.

That electrical beast. The one he'd seen in the news report. Its name was Xurkitree. With a name, its existence seemed a lot more solid.

Xurkitree. An electric type, from a dimension called The Lightning Plantation.

'It energises itself with electricity, preying on anything that produces it. Although it prefers non-organic sources. As such it's a common sight around electrical plants in its home world.

'It stands like a tree, with all five limbs pressed into the ground as it searches for electricity. It often draws lightning to itself in this position. The inhabitants of The Lightning Plantation sometimes tame them to use them as lightning rods, diverting lightning away from vulnerable areas.'

"Tame them?" Macro gasped. "They didn't look like they could be tamed from those photos."

DL shrugged. "Do you look good in all your photos?"

"Well… I… erm…" He stuttered and sipped at his cocoa. "I like to think I do."

She chuckled and turned her head to look at him. "Shall we keep looking over this list? Or do you want to try and get some sleep?"

"I still don't think I can," he said, although a yawn betrayed him.

"Want me to read them to you?" she asked. "Then you can at least close your eyes."

He shrugged and shuffled down against his pillow. "Sure."

She opened up the next Ultra Beast, but the image made him sit up again. That bamboo creature… he'd only seen its head, but he recognised its face instantly. The rest of it was huge, sporting two cannons floating at its sides.

Steel and flying type. Apparently lived in a place called The Crater. It made him think of the moon, riddled with craters from meteor

impacts. With those cannons, he wouldn't be surprised if it made them.

"Celesteela," said DL. "Despite being a steel and flying type, it draws nutrients from the soil like a plant. It can also create large roots, anchoring itself in place. Its cannons fire out various debris, from iron to fire. It's been known to burn down entire forests. It shoots a flammable gas from its cannons to propel itself through the air for high speed flight."

Macro clutched his mug tightly to stop his paws from trembling.

"C-can they… tame that one?" he asked.

DL placed a paw over the screen, blocking out the text and photo. "It doesn't say. But… there's no reason why not, is there?"

Macro looked away from her, fixing his attention on the door.

"Look, at least we know its weakness now," she said.

"Yeh. Steel flying type." He clutched his mug close to his lips. "I can't do anything to it."

"No, but Anchor can. And so can I."

He turned to look at her again, catching a reassuring smile.

"Tomorrow, we'll land somewhere and try out those Z-Moves," she said. "Meanwhile, get some rest or you won't be joining us."

He sighed and returned to his pillow, shuffling down so his shoulders were resting against it. He quickly downed the remains of his cocoa then handed the mug back to DL.

She slipped from the bed and gathered up her own mug. The bed suddenly felt really cold, despite the warmth lingering behind where she'd been sat.

"Do you want me to leave your computer?" she asked.

"Please." He diverted his eyes from hers. "I might need it."

She nodded and placed it carefully on the night stand. Then she turned to leave his room. The door opened, but she paused in the doorway and looked back at him.

"I'll be in the cockpit if you need me," she said.

He watched the door close, leaving him feeling very cold and alone. But at least she wasn't annoyed with him. That gnawing guilt had been swiftly expunged. With a sigh, he shuffled under his duvet and rearranged his pillows. A soft scent wafted up from the one DL had been leaning against. It smelled just like her. A soft sweetness hidden beneath the lavender from the ship's shower. It warmed him from the inside. Enough to make him want to run after her.

He bit back the urge and tucked the pillow beside him, turning his back on it. But it was still there. He stared at the wall, trying to ignore it. But he was convinced it was getting worse. It was oddly soothing…

As he closed his eyes, he found himself rolling over, snuggling into the pillow. Before he knew it, he was sound asleep.

…

Annie burst from the Moonlight Lounge, still clutching the dazed chatot in her claws. A loud laugh escaped her and she turned to shout over her shoulder.

"I thought that might motivate you!"

The rest of her crew were mixed amid the riled rabble that pursued her down the street. Lasers fired left and right, widely missing her as the space pirates intended to slow her down more so than actually hit her. Something whizzed over her head, slicing through the air,

and she ducked with a squeak. A silver disk bounced ahead of her, rolling down the street on its serrated edge. An arrow lay discarded behind it, the sharp point of its feather blunted where it had struck something solid.

She trampled over it and glanced back at the crowd. Waveform had caught up with her now, notching another feather onto his vine. Widget's brown tail bobbed up and down behind the decidueye as he ran in circles, throwing his weight around to knock the faster pirates back into the mob. Those less fortunate to land on their feet were trampled beneath those bigger than them, creating a trip hazard to slow the space pirates down.

"Not too far now," said Waveform. "Keep running."

Annie laughed and picked up her pace, speeding around a corner onto the docks. Adrenaline fired through her veins, and her lungs felt fit to burst. It was fabulous.

The colourful hulls of the ships filled the docks, as did the colourful forms of many more pirates. Bright eyes widened as the mob followed the maniacal archeops, fixing on the angered faces and the frantic feathers clutched in her claws. The irritating chatot decided to dig his hooked beak into her claws between desperate cries for help that were drowned out beneath the enraged voices that filled the street.

Annie made a beeline for her pyukumyuku ship, and her smile widened when she saw the pokemon waiting around it. Web and Zip stood behind N0ize, the incineroar's nonchalance contrasting wildly with the fear in the other two's eyes. He stood with his arms folded and flashed her a single canine in a playful grin. Another pokemon stood a few feet away from him, leaning on a bollard. A magmortar, his right arm decked out with a flashy cybernetic canon. His eyes were locked on Annie and Waveform, occasionally going to the bird flapping in her grip. Blue, white and yellow feathers drifted around her feet as she rushed towards her ship, but not without another glance over her shoulder.

"Y'all might wanna think about what I said!" she roared.

More lasers fired, more items were thrown, another arrow went whizzing over her head to impale another disk into the immaculate hull of a lanturn ship. Some pirate was going to be very upset about that.

Annie skidded to a halt before N0ize and lifted Hatter up high above her head. His beak aimed for her eye, reaching just shy of it. The archeops didn't so much as flinch.

"Alright, listen!" she snapped at the oncoming mob. "I'm gonna take off with this parrot, and y'all are gonna let me!"

The mob didn't stop running. Some of the bystanders abandoned their leisure to intervene, trying to hold some of the angry pirates back. Others decided to join in, rushing at her from the street only to be held back by a gunk shot from Web. Lasers and elemental attacks whizzed over the heads of the living barrier, skimming Annie's ship and narrowly missing her feathers.

Widget cut through the barrier of pirates, landed at her feet and turned his back on her. "Get on your dumb ship, human!"

"Come on, Annie." Web placed a paw on her shoulder and steered her to the door. "We're not wanted here."

"They just want to eat me," Zip said weakly.

Annie didn't budge. The goldeen's mechanical feet clambered up the tinny door into the ship behind her, and he paused at the doorway.

"Hurry, before they add archeops to the menu!" he cried.

"Flambeed parrot, anyone?" Annie waved Hatter at the crowd. "Because mark my words, I'll plunge him into one of your laser attacks!"

"What?!" Hatter screeched. "Are you crazy?!"

"Yes."

N0ize strode to her side and shoved her backwards. A stray laser nearly clipped his ear, singing the fur at the tip, but he didn't appear to notice or care.

"All right, I think we've had enough here, don't you?" he said.

The magmortar abandoned his post against the bollard and cut her off from view, aiming his cybernetic canon at the mob. A deep, pulsating noise filled the air, followed by a beam of electricity. It flew out of his canon with a deafening screech, causing those closest to him to cover their ears and flinch back. The mob was brought to a halt as the beam flew over their heads and punched a neat hole a billboard atop a casino. The beam blinked out as rapidly as it had started, plunging the docks into silence. The damaged billboard teetered backwards then crashed down onto the roof with an almighty clatter.

"I think we're all better'n this," N0ize rumbled. "Get yer fuzzy asses back to Moonlight Lounge, you drunkards."

"She's taking off with Hatter!" came a very squeaky voice from deep within the mob.

Other voices rose up to join in, each stating their concerns for the chatot. A majority of the concerns were more about needing him to run a few errands or pay their rewards, which Annie thought was a little unfair.

The magmortar raised his cannon again, and the voices all cut off simultaneously.

"Yeh?" N0ize spat towards the lanturn ship then fixed a leer on the crowd. "You ever thought she might have good reason?"

"Bounty hunter!" someone cried. "She's a bounty hunter!"

"Waltzing in here for that jackin' mayor!" said another.

"I don't work for no mayor!" Annie put her paws on her hips and flinched as Hatter dug his beak into her scaly leg. "I thought I made that clear in that… Mooney… Loungey place."

Waveform backed towards her, keeping his arrow notched. Tracer came from the other side, watching the mob over his shoulder with his paw clutched over his stick, which was partially buried in his tail. He ducked his head as someone let out an electric attack, and the sparks bounced off an innocent bollard, shattering it on impact. He looked over at Annie, wide-eyed, and opened his mouth to speak, but a loud shout from the crowd cut him off.

Trojan bolted from amid the group, eyes filled with fire. Tracer seemed to relax momentarily and he looked up at the scrafty.

"Where did you get-"

"Get on the ship!" Trojan's roar had been aimed at Annie.

He bolted past her, knocking the detective off balance, and clattered up onto the ship, causing it to rock precariously. Tracer stumbled backwards, steadying himself against the lanturn ship.

"Come on, Annie." Waveform placed a paw on her shoulder and backed towards the pyukumyuku. "We're leaving."

Annie didn't even look up at him. Her attention was still fixed on the angry mob.

"I have you know I don't work for the mayor!" she said. "I'm trying to stir all you pirates up into a frenzy! One day, that mayor will be gone and we'll have ourselves to thank!"

She thudded her chest with her claws, Hatter swaying unceremoniously. His face had turned a little pale beneath his black plumage.

"Lies!" one of the pirates shouted.

This was enough to stir up the others. They pushed back against the barrier of pirates, not so much as flinching as the magmortar raised his railgun cannon once more.

The pyukumyuku flared to life, its tinny hull rattling like a can of coins.

"Annie!" Web poked her head out of the door. "Come on! We're leaving!"

N0ize chuckled and shook his head, while Tracer fidgeted his paws together. He brandished his stick and aimed it into the crowd.

"Time's running out." He sent out a flamethrower, singing the fur of a purugly. "I hope you've got a backup plan other than spouting another monologue!"

Web looked back into the ship, stepping aside to let Waveform on. Trojan had sat himself down at the steering controls, muttering curses as he stared at Annie's back.

"Do we have a backup plan?" Web asked. "She won't move."

"I'm on it! Don't nag me." Trojan lifted a paw and struck The Big Red Button.

A white, sticky mass shot out of the pyukumyuku's nose, stretching out like a set of claws. Annie was on a ramble about mayors and fishes, much to the confusion of the space pirates since it had stopped making any coherent sense. The gooey claws fastened around her waist, plucking her from the docks.

A small yelp left her throat as the stretchy mass shot back towards the pyukumyuku's nose, dragging her deep within its confines. The last thing the crowd heard as it snatched her on board was:

"This is mutiny!"

Trojan grimaced and looked back at Web and Waveform. The pyukumyuku rose from the docks, sending the two off balance. Zip's metal claws screeched over the surface as he slid backwards into the skuntank's arms. She made sure the goldeen was securely locked in place then settled herself into her seat.

"I don't think she liked that," said Zip weakly.

"I have to agree," said Waveform. "I feel it was a little discourteous."

"I don't really care," said Trojan, rubbing the back of his neck with a grimace. "She was causing a jackin' ruckus. We coulda been killed."

"Murder is illegal, even in Pulse City," said Web. "The worst that could have happened-"

"Is monslaughter," said Trojan. "I reckon some got trampled to death in that mob and it's all her fault. I have every right mind to keep her in the cargo bay until we reach… I dunno…"

"Wave City," said Zip. "She told me we'd go to Wave City and talk to the water types."

Trojan leant on his paw and frowned at the blackness ahead. "Right now, I couldn't care less."

Banging came from beneath them, shaking the seats. The scrafty grit his teeth together and fought back the urge to stamp his foot in response.

"Anyway, she can stay there for a while," he grumbled. "I need to cool off."

"Can't she get out?" Web asked.

"'Course not," said Trojan. "What kinda jackass leaves a cargo bay door unlocked? That's just askin' for trouble."

"Then someone should go and get her."

Waveform glanced back down the ship then made his way towards the captain's seat. Before he could lower himself into it, Trojan looked up at him and froze him in place with a glare.

"Then I vouch you do it," he said. "'Cos if I see her, I'm gonna pluck her feathers out."

Waveform's face paled and his eyes flit left and right. He cleared his throat and lowered his scarf from his metallic beak.

"I speak for all avians when I say please… don't do that."

"She ain't avian. She's human." Trojan waved a paw, brushing off Waveform's crimson leer. "Go get her. Then use your scarf to gag her."

"What's got your gogoat?" Web snapped.

Trojan scoffed and snapped his head around to face her, flinching with the momentum. "I got trampled! Trampled! I ain't ever been so freakin' humiliated!"

Web's jaw dropped and she rose to her feet.

"Sit down!" Trojan snapped, watching as she slumped back into her seat. "Worst thing was that shamus saw everything. That look of concern on his wretched face, fighting back as he got swept away. Like I wanted his help…" The scrafty yawned and leant back in his seat, spotting Waveform still watching him. "You gettin' her or what?"

Waveform shook his head with a sigh and turned towards the cargo bay. The little hatch was built into the floor, right at the back of the ship. He pulled it open and leant his head inside, waiting until his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Something small crashed back and forth, bouncing off the walls and squawking insults. It turned and shot towards Waveform, startling the decidueye back onto the ship. A loud hoot escaped his beak, much to his dismay, and he watched

the chatot bolt from the hatch and crash into the ceiling. He fell back through the hatch like a stunned chick.

Waveform clambered down, scooping Hatter up under one wing. He spotted Annie lying in a tangled sprawl a few feet away. She writhed beneath the sticky mass, fixing her eyes on him.

"A little help here?" she asked.

Waveform deposited Hatter and scrambled over to her. The pyukumyuku's 'innards' were still fastened around her small frame. He grabbed at them in his paws and tugged them free. They weren't so much sticky as they were gooey and difficult to latch onto. Once he'd prised them free, Annie staggered to her feet and shook out her dishevelled feathers. A few yellow ones fell free, joining a goopy mass of them on the floor. Waveform shook a couple from his paws then wiped them down on his chest.

"Thank you," she said. "Now I need to speak to the designer behind this ridiculous yet genius idea and request they never use it on me again."

He gave her a curt nod and gathered up the stunned chatot. Fortunately Trojan had installed a ladder, making climbing out of the cargo bay relatively easy. Once they were back on board, Annie marched to her seat and flopped back into it, kicking her talons up onto the dashboard.

Trojan fired her a sideways glare and smirked. "You're the one who requested a pyukumyuku."

"Yeh, that was genius." She scratched some goop off her shoulder and grinned at him. "Do that to me again and you're fired."

"Where do you want our hostage?" Waveform asked.

She turned to look at him and frowned at the parrot cradled in his right wing.

"Do we have a cage?" she asked.

Waveform's beak fell open and both Web and Zip gaped at her wordlessly.

"What?" Annie shrugged. "Back in my world, we sometimes keep birdies in cages."

"Well we're not in your world," said Trojan. "A cage is a prison cell."

"Then… set him in a corner somewhere until he wakes up." Annie yawned and leant her head back in her seat. "I'll give him my request later. Then we can discuss how much we can pay him."

"Pay him?" Trojan scoffed.

"We don't really have much money, dear," said Web. "We can't pay him."

"Then we make money." Annie reached into her pouch and pulled out the poster she'd claimed from Hatter's stall. "There are a couple of guys we can round up. They're worth a pretty penny."

Waveform took the poster from her and unravelled it. "Hunter? His bounty's gone up again."

"You know this mawile?" Annie pointed a claw at the wanted poster.

"Not personally. But there's not a pokemon in System who's managed to get so much as close to arresting him. You think we can catch him, you're living a pipe dream."

"What about the other one then?" She tapped the sheet.

He turned it over, revealing the second target. "Surge? What did she do?"

"Sounds like you know her then."

"We've done a job or two together," he said. "Split the reward, although she always left with more so I stopped bothering. Sounds like she's got her paws dirty in government secrets." He looked up at Annie and cleared his throat. "Much like us, I guess."

She waved a wing at him and turned away. "I ain't no government secret."

Purple streaked across the sky like a dart and she leant forward, straining to make it out. She wasn't alone. Trojan stared at it too, frowning at the anomaly.

"Is that a shooting star?" she gasped. "Didn't think they were purple."

"That ain't no star, we ain't high enough," said Trojan.

"What is it then?" Annie nudged him. "You got a telescope?"

He beat her claws away and urged the ship forward. "No I ain't got no telescope. Shut up while I try to get us closer."

"You seriously think we can catch it in this…" Web waved at the ship's walls. "This… hunk of-"

Trojan and Annie both glared over their shoulders.

The skuntank cleared her throat and smiled. "Hunk of fantastic design?"

"The engine I bought might not be the latest model." Waveform sat in his seat and secured himself in. "But I can assure you we can at least catch up with that creature."

"Creature?" Annie looked back at him. "You think that's a creature?"

"Is your vision not as good as mine?" Waveform asked. "I can make that out clearly. It's nothing I've ever seen before."

Annie squinted at it. "It just looks like a purple blob to me."

"Wait for it," said Trojan. "We're getting up to five hundred and fifty miles per hour here. If I were to guess, that thing is flying closer to four hundred."

She clapped her claws together and bounced in her seat. "Oh! This is getting exciting!"

"I'd like to ask what you expect," said Trojan. "But given random creatures have been showing up, I'm gonna hazard a guess this is one of them."

"I think you might be right," said Waveform.

"Well, we're gaining on it quickly," said Trojan. "And it appears to be slowing down."

"What do you plan to-" Waveform's voice cut off with a grunt and he keeled forward in his seat.

Hatter shot over to Annie and landed on her shoulder, screeching in her ear.

"You crazy moron! What do you think you-" He trailed off and looked out of the window. His tiny eyes widened like saucers and he clutched her head with both wings. "What on earth is that?!"

"Hang on a sec…" Annie grinned widely, brushing the chatot aside. "It looks like an onion!"

The odd, purple creature turned its bulbous head back towards them. When it spotted the ship, it flicked its long tail and tried to speed up.

"Are you jackin' serious?" Trojan leered at her. "What kind of freak-ass onions did you used to eat?"

"The ones that came on my plate," said Annie. "Can this hunk of fantastic design go any faster?"

He muttered under his breath and pressed the ship onward. It gained fractionally in speed, drawing them closer to the fleeing creature.

"What do you expect us to do when we get close to it?" Web asked, somewhat apprehensively.

"Simple." Annie kicked her feet up again and leant back, almost sending Hatter to the floor. "We catch it with that goop thing you used on me."

"I have to say," said Waveform. "This creature doesn't look much like the celebi I've seen in drawings."

"Neither does Annie's archeops form," said Zip.

"Exactly," said Annie. "So let's hurry up and catch that Time Onion."

Web pointed a claw at the blob. "You actually want to catch this?"

"Yep."

"Without knowing for certain that this is a celebi?"

"Yep."

"And hold it in this ship?"

"Yep."

Web shook her head and let it fall into her open paws.

"I got a question." Trojan turned fully in his seat to face her. "Are you crazy?"

"I've already answered that question once today." She yawned again and glanced down at The Big Red Button. "I guess that's the one you use to set it off? Or… it deposits the ship's engine like in those daft films I watched as a kid."

Trojan leant defensively over the button. "I'm not having some unknown creature on this ship."

Annie looked back out of the window. The creature was in plain view. A violet body with a long, reptilian tail. Its bulbous head had some kind of needle-like appendage sticking out of it, yet its arms and legs made its appearance oddly cute. It looked quite like a pokemon, except one she'd never seen. Although that was hardly a feat given she'd not seen all that many. Nevertheless, it did look onion-like in an odd not-quite-an-onion kind of way.

Maybe it was a red onion?

She scratched her nose and looked back down at what she could see of The Big Red Button. She hadn't seen how far Innards Out could reach. And with Trojan guarding the button like a mighteyena with a bone, she only had one chance to get it right.

Her eyes flew to Hatter, cowering on her shoulder, his beak hanging open as he stared at the blob's purple bottom.

"Hmm…" She ran a claw under her chin and glanced up at the ceiling.

"She's plotting something," whispered Zip.

Closer now. Still out of her own physical reach, but the creature's head kept turning back and its bright eyes kept widening whenever it saw them.

Annie reached up and grabbed Hatter, eliciting a squeak from him. Then she tossed him at Trojan's face. Flapping wings and scrambling talons sent the scrafty reeling back in his seat, roaring profanities. She leapt across the dashboard and struck The Big Red Button. The white goopy mass lurched out of the ship's nose much faster than the ship could physically fly. It engulfed the creature full on, swallowing it up in the stretchy, claw-like tendrils. It then retracted back into the ship with just as much speed as it left.

A grin split Annie's face and she leant back into her seat, kicking her talons back up onto the dashboard.

The ship fell silent. All eyes were on her. Hatter perched on the back of Trojan's chair, clutching the scrafty's cheek in both wings. Trojan didn't seem to care. His expression went from terrified to angry in the blink of an eye, and he exploded from his seat, sending Hatter flapping over to Web.

"I told you not to press it!" he roared.

Annie wagged a claw at him. "You never, ever tell someone not to press a red button. It makes it even more tempting!"

"But now we have a strange, potentially dangerous creature on the ship!"

"No we don't." She rose to her feet and strolled towards the hatch. "It's Annie's Time Onion. By the way, it's dark down there. Does anyone have a torch?"

…

Tracer and Widget watched the pyukumyuku ship surge into the horizon, its movements ungainly and sporadic. The mob had died down now. Pokemon returned to their previous endeavours, or boarded their ships to leave Pulse City. Tracer had held back perchance any had tried to pursue the human, but so far the only ships that had left the dock had gone off in other directions.

"We're not going after her?" Widget asked.

"Oh, we are." Tracer stubbed out his cigar on the remains of the shattered bollard and thrust his paws into his trench coat pockets. "I just don't want her to think we're giving chase."

"She gets much further out, we're gonna lose her."

"I wouldn't worry about that." N0ize's voice startled the two detectives.

Tracer looked over at the incineroar, leaning against the hull of their alomomola. The magmortar was still with him, feverishly polishing his railgun appendage.

The incineroar flashed a grin. "My ship could track her no problem. Got sensors that can pick up ships hundreds of miles away."

Tracer choked on his own spittle while Widget almost fell over on his haunches. Tracer strove to regain his composure and tried to mask his surprise behind clearing his throat.

"I'd like to ask how you got your paws on such equipment," he began, "given the distance most top government ships can reach is only a couple of hundred miles."

N0ize maintained his grin for a painfully long, silent moment, causing Tracer to sweat under his coat.

"That's classified," said the space pirate.

Tracer's ears sank and he nodded sullenly. "Well, we hate to disappoint you, but-"

"We've got our own ship," said Widget.

"What?" N0ize nodded behind him at the alomomola. "This pink thing? Little girly, ain't it?"

"It's not girly!" Widget yapped.

"It is a little girly," Tracer told him.

"All right, fine." Widget rolled his eyes. "It's girly. But it flies, and it has two bedrooms."

"Not really enough room for little you if your boss and I each get a room, is there?" N0ize folded his arms and smirked.

Widget's tail went limp and his jaw went slack. He looked between the incineroar and Tracer, fixing the latter with pleading puppy eyes.

"I'm not so sure what makes you think were taking you with us," said Tracer. "Don't get me wrong, I appreciate your help-"

"He helped?" Widget asked.

"-But I think we're okay from here," Tracer finished, blatantly ignoring his small companion.

"You're kiddin' me, right?" N0ize scratched inside his ear and flicked away what Tracer desperately hoped wasn't a flea. "You get me all involved with this human of yours and you expect me to just go away quietly? I got questions, fuzz. Besides, I really wanna see how this all plays out. She caused quite a stir here. I reckon she'll cause even bigger stirs down on System Ground."

The incineroar's face split into an even bigger grin, flashing one of his sharp canines. The magmortar looked up from his railgun and frowned between the space pirate and detectives.

"So… where's she goin' next?" N0ize asked.

Tracer shrugged. "No idea. But she appears to be heading in the direction of Meta City."

"She lands there, she's got a death wish." N0ize nodded to the other fire type who returned to his polishing. "She's gonna need a little backup."

Tracer's heart sank. So both pirates were wanting to squeeze themselves onto his ship? Things were starting to feel a little cozy. And somewhat dangerous.

"Thank you, gentlemon," he said. "But we'll be taking our leave now."

N0ize laughed while the magmortar rolled his eyes.

"You hear that, Cyph3r?" N0ize nudged the magmortar with his elbow. "They think they're just gonna leave us behind!" He fixed Tracer in a leer decorated with a grin to make it even more menacing. "I think not, fuzz. You need backup. This has gone too deep even for you. With Socket, and with Pulse City. You turn away from us, you'll leave yourselves vulnerable to a whole host of enemies waiting to tear you limb from limb. Those pokemon you cheezed off in Moonlight Lounge? They'll recognise you, and they'll come for you. It also won't be long until Socket realises you've turned tail on her, helpin' the human raise a rebellion against her, against meat eaters, and whatever else sparks her fancy. 'Cos let's face it, she's a tickin' time bomb of disaster waitin' to happen. And I wanna see it! So get your two fuzzy tails onto my sharpedo and we'll head on out to tail that human you're so fixated with."

Tracer stared at him, open mouthed. Widget gave a pained whimper beside him, his brown eyes fixed on the alomomola. Tracer counted off his list of crimes. Failing to apprehend Annie, more and more willingly with each fail. Selling a government ship. Assisting in causing a scene. Partnering with space pirates. Now he was going to abandon his ill-gotten ship to hot tail it across System with a pair of space pirates who only wanted to see the mayor fall off her high horse and all of System to go into an uproar.

All for the sake of fun.

Fun or not, two large pokemon backing him wouldn't be a terrible thing.

"Okay. We'll go with you." He pointed a claw at N0ize's chest. "But I'm in charge."

The incineroar threw his head back and laughed heartily. "Of course. This is your little mission after all. We're just hired paws."

N0ize met Tracer's confused gape with yet another grin and moved away around the other side of the alomomola. Tracer followed after him with Widget in tow.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," the eevee muttered.

Tracer said nothing. But oh how he wanted to agree.

Sat in the docks, dwarfed by the alomamola, was the stout form of a sharpedo. Painted along the side of it was a word Tracer never wished to repeat. N0ize stood beside its jaws and beckoned him on board.

"We board through its mouth?" Widget's voice didn't hide his disgust.

"I guess so," Tracer muttered.

"Goin' off the size of it, you and I will be bunking in the cargo hold," the eevee snorted.

As they stepped forwards, the ground lurched. Voices rose into an uproar, and Tracer turned slowly with a sinking feeling deep within his gut. Surely the human hadn't actually left a 'ticking time bomb of disaster' somewhere deep within Pulse City?

"Tracer…" Widget's voice wavered.

The delphox followed his friend's eyes towards the tall buildings in the distance. Towering over them was a creature he'd never seen before. Tall, slender at the top and wide towards its shoulders. The rest of it vanished beyond the buildings. Then there was the scream. An unearthly scream coming from that very monster. Two canons sat at either side of it, and it lifted one, aiming it towards the heart of Pulse City. Towards them.

"Get on the ship!" Widget yapped.

He turned tail and Tracer followed after him. They dived after N0ize, and the shark-shaped ship's jaws snapped shut behind them.

Cyph3r was already at the controls, pulling the ship out of the docks. Tracer stared from the window, his eyes locked on the glowing cannon.

"What is that thing?" N0ize asked, his voice wavering uncharacteristically.

Tracer shook his head slowly. "I regret to say I've no idea."

A flash split the sky as the cannon fired into Pulse City. Then a sound like thunder. An explosion of green and ruin.

…

The danger factor gets cranked up a notch, huh? Please R&R! =D

Chapter 52

A/N - I'm pretty excited, because I've got a Special Episode written up and ready to go, and I've been timing it to fit in with the plot perfectly. It will be going up on the 16th July, all being well, which is a Monday (so as not to interfere with the flow of the story!) If y'all like Alice in Wonderland, I think you're going to like it ;)

As always, thanks so much for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Fifty Two

Macro woke up in a tangle of sheets with his face still buried into his pillow. At some point he'd flipped over, dragging the pillow with him. He propped it against the wall and rolled onto his back to reach for his computer. A faint trickle of light came through the window, but it wasn't enough to gauge what time it was.

Eight thirty in the morning. He'd slept right through the breakfast alarm.

He groaned and unwound himself from his sheets, hastily remaking the bed as a final decision to not climb back into it. Then he grabbed his belt and scarf and made for the door.

His sleep had been somewhat dreamless, and he'd needed it. The immense grogginess that filled his head was something he'd become accustomed to after a good night's sleep. After a strong coffee and a pile of steaming pancakes to clear the cobwebs away, he'd be good to go.

He yawned widely and paused to poke his head into the cockpit. Matrix leant back in his seat with his over-sized headphones on, nodding along to some music Macro could only faintly make out. A

loud clatter came from the kitchen and Macro slipped into it, spotting Cookie doubled over by the oven. He swiftly mopped up what looked like caramel, muttering to himself about being a klutz, while DL silently set the table. She beamed when she spotted Macro, causing him to flush under his fur.

"You've got a late start," he said.

"I know. I requested it." She turned back to Cookie and stooped to help him mop up the sticky mess. "I thought you could all use a lie in."

Stomping feet thundered down the corridor and Anchor exploded into the kitchen. He grabbed the doorway and stared inside, his chest heaving. He looked over at Cookie and DL, eyed the set table and the steaming stove, and immediately relaxed.

Macro grabbed his seat and sank down into it. "I appreciate the thought, DL, but your message clearly didn't reach the rest of the crew."

"I did leave a note on the door for anyone who got up early." She rung out the wet cloth into the sink. "Matrix is obviously the only early riser."

As though on cue, the ribombee buzzed over Anchor's head and landed gracefully in his seat.

"I trust you slept well?" DL asked Macro.

"Like a log." He yawned again and leant his groggy head on his paw. "Is there an ETA on the coffee?"

"Coming right up!" Cookie straightened and grabbed the cafetiere from beside the stove. "I'm a little out of sorts this morning, so please forgive me if it's a little weak."

Macro poured a coffee for himself and Matrix then took a sip from his mug. It was a little weak. He frowned slightly but let it slide, settling back in his seat.

Cookie clenched his paws over his stomach, eyeing Macro curiously. "So it's okay? Thank goodness."

Matrix sipped his coffee and spoke without looking up. "It could have used an extra minute."

The slurpuff stuttered and looked over at Macro again.

Macro cracked an eye open. "It's fine. Don't worry about it."

Cookie waddled back to his stove and busied himself over various sticky sauces.

Anchor slumped down beside Macro and poured his own mug. "Someone either slept like a king, or is just desperate for a coffee this morning."

Macro said nothing as he sipped his drink, feeling it warm every nerve. He watched DL assist Cookie, muttering things to him that had some kind of placating affect on the jittery slurpuff. Her thick tail was held in a neat curl over her back as she moseyed back and forth, and the warm light from the fluorescent bulb highlighted every subtle curve of her body. Her gentle smile and chocolate fondue eyes only added to the warmth and peacefulness she seemed to radiate.

"Cap'n?"

Macro blinked and looked away from DL to meet Anchor's raised eyebrow.

"Did you hear me?" he asked. "I said we're only fifteen minutes away from Meta City. Is that our next destination?"

Macro almost spilled his coffee. A few drops sloshed over the side as he tried to steady it, peppering the table with little, dark spots.

"I thought we were headed to Cyan City," he said. "When did we-"

"Don't worry, we're not going to Meta City," said DL. "I spoke to Matrix last night. We agreed it might be a good idea to scope out the damage these Ultra Beasts are doing."

"What?" Macro fixed wide violet eyes on hers. "But I thought… aren't they actually in Meta City?"

"Yes, but we can get a feel for that in the outskirts," DL explained. "You can still see the mechanical trees from the outskirts, right? So we'll be able to see the Xurkitree's behaviour for ourselves. Rather than reading up and absorbing mindless propaganda."

"It would have been nice if you'd run it by me first," said Macro. "I mean, with everything that's going on right now - even space pirates are after me! - it's not safe for us all to just go down into the outskirts."

"Not to mention our bounty's gone up." Matrix nonchalantly sipped his mug while thumbing over his computer screen.

"What?" Macro stared, dumbfounded at him.

"You did know that, right? Fifty thousand credits?" Matrix turned his computer so Macro could see it. "Not just you and Surge. All of us are wanted now. Fifty thousand big ones. Except Cookie."

"Not a space pirate," Cookie chimed from the stove.

Macro blinked as it all came back to him, and his mug clattered to the table. He tugged at the fur on his head and groaned. "That complicates things even more!"

"Come on, Cap'n," said Anchor. "We were all wanted 'mon anyway. How does this change things?"

"A bigger price attracts more bounty hunters," said Macro. "And no space pirate is gonna sniff at fifty thousand, let alone the opportunity to claim it three times over!"

Matrix shrugged and dragged his computer back to himself, holding his mug in one paw as he continued reading over the recent news.

"We've been asked to turn these beasts in," said Anchor. "I say we not let this mishap put us off."

Macro narrowed his eyes at him. "Mishap?"

"Aye. I mean, would you let it put you off getting the rest of DL's memories?"

"I might proceed with some caution."

"Since when did you use caution?" Anchor choked back a laugh. "You show up guns blazin' no matter what the situation."

Macro turned away from him and clutched the hot mug to his chest. "This is different. Space pirates now want me, there are strange alien beasts destroying cities, and we'll be right in the thick of the action from both the beasts, thugs and Socket's goons!"

"And if there are any space pirates down there," said Matrix, "you can add ruffians to that list."

DL chuckled and popped a plate of pancakes in the middle of the table.

Macro eyed them, suddenly void of his appetite. Nevertheless, he grabbed a couple and dropped them onto his plate. If he was going to go with DL's bonkers plan, he was going to need his strength.

"So who's going down into the outskirts?" Anchor asked.

"I was thinking we could discuss that." DL pulled up a seat beside Macro and placed a hot pan of chocolate sauce before him. "Like

Macro said, we need to be cautious."

"And none of us have practised these Z-Moves," said Macro. "I sense a problem there already."

"We're not going to fight the Ultra Beasts," she said. "We're gathering data. We need to get them home, like Solgaleo said."

"And what if one attacks us?"

"Beat it back and run. Just don't hurt it."

Macro stuck his fork into his pancakes as the screaming face of Celesteela filled his mind. 'It's been known to burn down entire forests.' Blazing trees receded into burning buildings and he shook his head sharply to dislodge the onset of another flashback.

"You alright, Cap'n?"

He met Anchor's concerned face and returned to his pancakes, stuffing a forkful into his mouth. He barely tasted it.

"I'm just not ready for this," he said.

DL reached for his paw, then retracted back, her eyes going distant. Then she reached for the chocolate sauce and spooned a ladle-full over her plate.

"Look," said Macro. "We'll go. We'll scope it out. Spend no longer than an hour, two hours tops. But someone needs to stay on the ship with Matrix as back up. Because if something happens to me, Wildcard Gamma has to keep going."

"Nothing is going to happen to you," DL told him. "You'll stay in touch, and if you need us then we'll swoop in."

"Wait!" Macro raised both his paws and looked at each of his crew members in turn. Even Cookie had stopped what he was doing to listen in. "Am I going in there alone?!"

"Of course not!" Anchor spat. "I won't allow it!"

"That's exactly what I want to hear from my second in command." Macro spooned more pancake into his mouth.

"But if it's information you're gathering," said Anchor, "might I suggest you take someone small? Easier for you both to hide."

Macro looked up with his fork still in his mouth. His eyes wandered from Anchor to Matrix, taking in his tiny form. The ribombee wound his antenna in his paw, glancing between Macro and Anchor. Then he glanced towards the end of the table and Macro followed his eye to DL.

The pachirisu shrugged and leant back from her empty plate, almost spotless save for some chocolate streaks.

"If you need me to go with you, then I'll go," she said. "I've actually still got all that information Solgaleo sent me saved in my brain."

"That sorts it then," said Anchor. "Since she's basically a walking Ultra Beast Encyclopedia, then take DL."

Macro sank into his seat, fixing Matrix with a pleading look.

"Don't look at me," said Matrix. "I'm the only one who can use the navigation system. Do you want Wildcard Gamma to veer off course and leave you stranded?"

No. Macro didn't want that.

He looked back over at DL as she wiped chocolate from her pink nose. She gave him a reassuring nod, but it didn't serve to alleviate his nerves.

If anything, knowing he was going to be taking her down into the outskirts, System's single-most dangerous place outside of Pulse City, only served to fuel his fighting spirit.

…

The Time Onion didn't put up much of a fight. Since Annie and Waveform had untangled the thing from the ship's innards, it had gone from wriggly to placid quite quickly.

The pyukumyuku trundled on across System Sky in the vague direction of Wave City, but Annie didn't particularly care about that. She was more intent on getting the creature to talk, or move, or something.

She sat it back up on her knee, but its head lolled pathetically onto its shoulder, weakly tickling her with its antennae thing. It had three of them, and an odd wheezy noise kept coming from them. Sometimes musical, sometimes whiny.

"I still think that's how it communicates," said Web.

"I still think it ain't no celebi," said Trojan.

"Neither of you are being helpful," Annie said, somewhat calmly. "Either make a Time Onion to System-glish Dictionary, or find a clear picture of a real celebi and then we'll talk."

"System-glish?" Zip laughed, blowing a stream of bubbles from his gills.

The creature wheezed again, then struggled to lift its head. Its head was rather ungainly compared to its tiny body. If it kept lolling dramatically, it would fall off her lap sooner or later. Not to mention its body was sticky. Like a dried, thick sweat that made it easy to grip but repulsed her at the same time.

"I think this onion might be off," she said. "Does someone else want to hold it?"

"Not really," said Waveform. "My feathers still feel gammy from the last time."

"Is it slimy?" asked Zip.

"Not so much slimy as sticky," Annie answered. "I feel like if I chuck it at the wall, it'll cling to it."

Web placed her paws on her hips. "You're not chucking it at the wall."

"Like jack you're gettin' the walls sticky," said Trojan. "We don't even know if it's toxic."

"I say chuck it, right back out the window," said Hatter. "That thing ain't right!"

Annie turned the creature to face her and stared down at it. More wheezing. It didn't even open its mouth. It kept it tightly closed, and its glazed eyes drooped as it stared blankly at her feathered chest.

"What's wrong with it?" Annie asked. "Looks fine to me."

"You're kidding, right?" Hatter gasped. "Not only is it monstrous and alien, it's clearly dying!"

"Dying?"

"I didn't want to say this earlier, dear," said Web. "But I think he might be right. I don't think that's a celebi. It's got to be one of those creatures that have been showing up. It's alien and clearly doesn't belong here."

"Huh." Annie frowned at it. "Well, let's make it better then ask it how it can get me back home. Right?"

"Back home?" Zip glugged to the top of his bowl. "You mean after the rebellion, right?"

"Nope." Annie continued to stare at the creature. "If this guy can get me home, I'm off."

"But-"

"You can lead your own rebellion," she said. "Once I'm gone, you're in charge, little fish."

Everyone fell silent, staring at her open-mouthed. Eyes were either narrowed, or in the case of Zip, wide and frightened. She looked around at the cockpit, clutching the limp creature in her claws.

"Why y'all starin' at me?" She waved a wing to get their attention. "Hello? Did someone freeze time?" Her eyes snapped back to the creature. "Was it you, Mister Time Onion?"

Web let out a sigh and Trojan shifted in his seat, tearing his glare away from her.

"I ain't sayin' nothin'," he said.

"Well I do have something to say!" said Web.

"Save it for later," said Trojan. "Let's just get our asses to Wave City."

"Not so fast." Annie returned to staring at the 'Time Onion'. "If this little guy really is sick, then we need to get him better. Can we do that in Wave City?"

"It has some of the cleanest air in System," said Waveform. "Doctors often recommend it for those with asthma or chest infections."

"But the air in System Sky is clean, too," said Web. "Probably cleaner than on the ground where there's pollutants. If this creature had a breathing condition, it should be clearer up here."

"It's also thinner," said Waveform. "Which makes it harder to breathe."

"It doesn't mean you can't," said Web. "And we're lower down than most space pirate vessels fly right now. Not to mention our air filters and life support systems."

"Which are feeble at best," muttered the decidueye.

"I reckon it's the atmosphere," said Trojan. "It's alien to this world and can't breathe our air. It'll be dead before we hit the ground."

"That's no good!" said Annie. "It can't get me back home if it's dead!"

She adjusted her grip, but the creature lolled back in her hands. It's eyes were screwed shut and its breathing came in shallow bursts. There was only one thing for it. She had to resuscitate it. How did they do it in the movies again?

A lightbulb went off in her mind and she lay the creature across her lap.

"I have to issue mouth to mouth!" She leant forwards towards the creatures tiny mouth.

A firm paw grabbed her shoulder and yanked her back before she could even position herself properly.

"Don't be so foolish!" Waveform growled in her ear. "We don't know what stuff is coating it's body! It might be toxic!"

"Toxic…" Annie turned away from him and stared out of the window. "Toxic… toxic…"

Trojan muttered under his breath and looked away from her. "She's off on one again."

"Toxic."

The lights below them blurred into a cacophony of colour as her mind went to that word. 'Toxic'. She mulled it over, tasting it, trying to figure out where it fit in her reality.

Sticky creature. Possibly toxic. Toxic meant poisonous. Death.

Reality snapped back into focus and she turned in her seat to face Trojan.

"Get us back home," she said.

"Home?" he scoffed. "You think I can time travel now?"

"Not my home. Your home." She pointed a claw at the window. "That yellow, mucky place with the poisonous air."

Trojan stared at her, his lip curled up at one side in a confused sneer. A look of realisation crossed Web's face and she nodded.

"I think I understand," she said. "I'm not sure it will help the little creature, but it's worth a shot if we've no way of getting it back to its own world."

"Exactly," said Annie. "I want to help this Time Onion. It's my only chance to get home."

"I don't believe for one minute that air can help anybody," said Trojan. "But if you think so, we can give it a shot."

The ship lurched so the nose was pointing downward, and sank at a steady pace. As Annie clutched the little creature, it wheezed musically. Four notes, two high and two flat. Out of rhythm, but an unusual sound nontheless. As though its head was some kind of primitive pipe organ attempting to play a melancholic tune. In, out. In, out. Her eyes wandered to the long proboscis-like appendages on its head.

"We'll land in about five minutes," said Trojan. "Think the little guy can hang on that long?"

"I don't know," said Annie. "But I think you might be right about the air. That noise it's makin'… I think it's trying to breathe."

"Do you want me to check it's not got any obstruction?" Web asked. "You know, from the innards-out stuff?"

"I don't know. I don't think it's that." Annie turned it so she could examine the protrusions. "I don't believe it breathes through its mouth. It seems to be breathin' through these things."

Web stood and relieved Annie of the creature, then settled back into her seat as she checked over its proboscis.

"Why, you really are a sticky little fellow, aren't you?" she said. "Well… if it's not the slimy stuff from the innards-out, then let's hope your theory is right, Annie, and it's the air."

"Me too." Annie tucked her hands behind her head and leant back in her seat. "Because if it's not and it dies, then I guess I'm stuck here."

"Well the longer you're stuck here, the more I'm gonna kick your lanky ass," said Trojan. "And don't think I'm scared of your ancient power, 'cos I aint."

"What did I do to warrant you kicking my ass?" Annie asked.

"You serious? You jackin' serious?!" Trojan span in his seat and waved a paw at Zip.

The goldeen slumped in the bottom of his bowl, resting his head on his fins. He wouldn't look at either of them. Small bubbles rose from his gills to fizzle away on the surface.

"I'll leave you to think about it," Trojan said, turning back to his controls. "I need to focus on landing this wreck before I end up killin' us all."

The ship jerked and levelled out again. The crumbling rooftops of Spool City spread out before them, bouncing out of view as the ship leapt over them. It then came to a crashing halt in their back garden.

Annie flew forwards in her seat, throwing out her claws to catch herself on the dashboard. She shoved herself back into her seat and shook out her feathers.

"Whew!" She turned to look at the scrafty. "Might I suggest seat belts?"

Trojan sneered and rose to his feet, then stomped towards the door. It fell open with a clatter, and the ship immediately filled with the putrid, polluted air.

The creature's wheezing lessened slightly and its breathing became more desperate. Its head expanded and contracted as it sucked up air through its three proboscis.

"Goodness!" Web gasped and looked up at Annie. "I think you were right!"

She rose to her feet, cradling the creature in her arms, and raced from the ship.

Annie stood up slowly and exchanged glances with Waveform. The decidueye narrowed his eyes slightly and gestured for her to leave ahead of him, then turned to Zip. She paused in the doorway to look back at him crouching before the goldeen, shrugged, then clambered from the ship.

Web stood in the back garden, beaming from ear to ear. The wheezing had faded out completely, replaced with loud gasps reminiscent of someone breathing frantically through a straw. The creature's eyes were open, although still hooded. It stared blankly at the sky, its mouth slightly open.

"Look!" Web turned to Annie. "This horrible air has revived it! Who would ever have guessed this deadly air that can even kill steel types could actually give life to something?"

Annie peered over her shoulder at the creature. Its pupils focused onto them and it looked at each of them in turn.

Web cradled it in her arms like a hatchling and smiled. "You might be the only creature that can survive in this place."

It blinked a couple of times and opened its mouth again. "Where am I?"

Its mouth didn't move with each word. Annie thought the voice had only happened in her head. She blinked at the creature, wondering whether or not she should actually answer, when Web did instead.

"You're in System, honey. Where are you meant to be?"

"Ultra Metropolis." It blinked again. "Why am I here? What happened? Who are you? What are you? Where's my trainer?"

"I don't think we have all the answers," said Web. "But we can help you. Can you tell us what you are?"

"He's a Time Onion," said Annie. She stretched out her claws and flexed them. "Gimme!"

Web steered the creature protectively away and asked again, "What are you?"

"My name is Poipole," he said. "The same as every other member of my race."

"So you're not a Time Onion?" Annie asked.

"What's a Time Onion?" he asked.

"She thinks you're a celebi," explained Web.

The creature shook his bulbous head slowly. "I'm a poipole."

Annie snorted and wiped her claws on her feathers. "So you can't get me home?"

When the creature didn't answer, she folded her wings and frowned at him.

"That's disappointing." She turned and headed towards the house. "I'm going to go and get a shower. I feel oddly sticky."

The house was as cold as outdoors, as was the water. The open shower fixed to the top, left corner of the bathroom sprayed yellow water over her feathers, the walls and the floor. The drain gurgled a few times before refusing to take in any more water, creating a puddle in the concave tiles surrounding it. Annie clawed at her feathers until most of the goop from innards-out and the poipole's sticky body were off her. She never liked feeling sticky. Or wet. But a shower was the lesser of the two evils.

As she strained her feathers dry, her stomach growled. Having no watch or clock nearby she had no idea whether or not it was even meal time. Regardless, she was hungry. Hungry and tired. A quick snack and a good long sleep sounded absolutely delicious. She stomped through the pooling water and strutted out into the hallway, her claws leaving little wet patches as she hopped down the stairs. Droplets of water still fell from her feathers, spattering the wall and peeling woodwork. She was too busy watching where she put her feet, enjoying creating perfect prints on the dry wood, to see where she was going. As she landed on the final step, her snout found itself buried in fluffy, warm, white feathers.

"I think we need to have a little chat." Despite the calmness in his voice, there was a warning note that didn't settle well with her.

She pulled her head back and looked up into Waveform's crimson eyes. His face was as calm as his voice, yet somehow he seemed a lot bigger.

Annie raised an eyebrow and inclined her head on one side, taking him aback ever so slightly. He'd tried to mask it, but she'd seen it.

"Oh?" she said. "What about?"

He glanced over his shoulder at the voices coming from the kitchen. Muffled and incoherent. Then he turned back to her and frowned.

"'What about'," he scoffed. "Get upstairs. We can't talk here."

He span her around with his wing and nudged her forwards, causing her to stumble on the steep steps.

"But I'm hungry," she whined.

"You can eat later. This is more important."

"Hardly."

She tutted and hopped back up the stairs. Her wet prints were already fading away. When they reached the top, he steered her towards her room and followed her inside, closing the door behind them silently.

Annie looked from her still unmade bed to the decidueye and raised an eyebrow again.

"Couldn't we talk somewhere else?" she asked.

"I'm afraid we lack a meeting room, and I don't really want to make a scene in the kitchen." He tucked his wings under his collar and stared down at her like a teacher scolding his pupil. "I think we need to go over your recent actions."

"What recent actions?" She spread a wing towards the window and grinned. "All that awesome?"

"Awesome?" Waveform spat. "You think what you did in Pulse City was 'awesome'? First you tell a detective and some space pirate crony everything about your 'plan' and where you came from, then you kidnap another space pirate who, by the way, is still cowering on the ship. Don't even get me started on your malicious handling of him, either. I know I don't think much of space pirates. My job is to round them up and turn them in, but I can't turn a blind eye on you waving him around by the tail! Then you go and upset Zip. The little

fish you've adopted and promised - blindly - to rescue him and his kind from being turned into meat."

He paused and she stared up at him, unblinking. He took a breath, unfurling his wings to cross over his chest, and leant back against the wall.

"I know I backed you," he said. "I thought you had a good premise. Sort out the mayor, free the water dwellers, clean up the outskirts. No more toxic air. Give those living in unfair persecution a voice. I liked it. But seeing all this… I honestly don't think you're capable."

She finally blinked. Silently.

"You're no captain," he went on. "A captain doesn't behave like that. A captain cares about their crew. The ship goes down, they go with it. You know as much about being a captain as you do about being a pokemon. You go around looking like one, but you can't play the part." He waved a wing-paw at her soggy form then tucked it away again. "I think you need to take a good look in the mirror and tell me if you really, truly believe you can handle this."

"I don't got a mirror." She took a step back and glanced over at the yellowed wall and lop-sided drawers. "Besides. I got this, believe me. Everything is going fine."

"It's not going fine! We've got a terrified space pirate holding his breath on your ship, and a depressed goldeen in the kitchen. Not to mention that creature you've abducted and the fact we're back exactly where we started. Back in Spool City breathing toxic air. If it's bad for Webber I can't imagine how bad it must be for you. You weren't even born here."

Annie folded her arms and stared sideways at him. "If we didn't come back here, that little creature would have died."

"You only wanted to save it because you thought it was a celebi." He met her stare and narrowed his eyes. "If you knew it wasn't what

would you have done? Sent it back out into the atmosphere?"

"Of course not. I'm not a monster."

"Says the human swinging a chatot around by the tail."

"Look!" She raised her wings and flexed her claws. "I've got tiny hand-things here. And no one gave me anything to put him in. How was I meant to carry him?"

"Carrying is not the same as swinging around. Nor is threatening to kill him."

She let out a low groan and trailed her claws down her face. Anger bubbled up inside her like an overheating pot of stew that she fought desperately to put a lid on.

"Fine!" she snapped. "You think it's so easy being captain, you take over."

"I'm not saying it is easy being captain. Quite the opposite. And I'm not taking over." He crouched down so he was level with her, and placed a paw on his knee. "I'm just saying you need a bit of a reality check here. You need to think things through more. Apologise to Hatter, give him your request and let him go. And don't worry about paying him, I'll deal with that."

She cracked her claws to peer at him. "You can pay him?"

He shrugged a shoulder, and she thought she saw him smile. There was that lid.

"I thought you said we had no money," she said.

"Like I said, don't worry about it." He paused and trailed his eyes over her. "Now. You're well out of your element here. And from what I can gather from your back story, you've not had much chance at freedom. I hope our little talk has made you realise you're going about it the wrong way. You might think you've got a crew behind you

with this rebellion, but if you keep behaving like this, before long Web and Trojan aren't going to back you. Web used to be a pirate, and I wouldn't blame her if she accused you of giving them a bad press. That stir you caused in Pulse City will have done more damage than good. As for Trojan, you can only push him so far before he snaps."

"So I gotta apologise to them too?"

Waveform nodded.

"Alright. I'll do it." She tried to move past him, but he stretched out a wing to block her way. "Do you want me to apologise or not?"

"I'm not done." He gently scooted her back in front of him. "You have to learn to walk before you learn to run. You're not going to make a good space pirate or rebellion leader if you don't know how to act like you actually belong in System."

"But I don't belong in System."

"That's why I said 'act'. Now…" He grabbed her claws in his paw and held up her left wing. "No bird goes around looking like they've just rolled in a thorn bush."

She furrowed her brow and pouted. "Hey! I have you know I just showered."

"Yes, and I'm going to guess you squeezed your feathers dry rather than shaking the water off. Am I right?"

"Maybe."

Waveform released her and placed his wing back across his knee. "Do you know anything about birds, Annie?"

"They have feathers, lay eggs and fly." She folded her wings and puffed out her chest. "They also evolved from dinosaurs."

"And you are…?"

"Annie."

He slapped his paw onto his face. "Yes, but not quite what I was going for here."

"I'm an archeops," she said. "Evidence to prove my point."

"Yes, a prehistoric bird that scientists believe were weak fliers. But that's not to say they couldn't fly. You appear to really struggle in that area, and if the way you treat your feathers is anything to go by then I think we've figured out why."

Annie raised her wing to examine it. The blue and yellow feathers lay in a haphazard fashion, still sodden with water.

"Archeops weren't just tatty-looking birds?" she asked.

"Well, you're feathers are primitive but they don't look like those of a dodrio. I'd say you could likely fly given the chance."

"Wow. I'd really like that." She grinned widely. "You gonna show me how?"

"First thing's first, you need to learn a little feather maintenance."

"What? Preening?"

"Exactly."

"But…" She frowned again. "But I don't have a beak."

He merely shrugged. "I don't think you need one. Just… comb your feathers with your teeth. Knit them together, get them into the right position."

"Huh."

She turned her reptilian head towards her right wing and frowned at the long, blue feathers. Then she grabbed them in her teeth and dragged them through, pulling off odd strands and spluttering as she tried to avoid swallowing them.

Beside her, Waveform grimaced. "Stop! Stop."

She looked up, flicking out her tongue to remove the coarse, blue strands. Waveform didn't look her in the eye. He was too preoccupied with the mess she'd made of her already messy feathers. He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his beak above its armour.

"I guess I'm going to have to show you," he said.

She shuffled around so she was facing him and stared up at him expectantly. He raised his own wing and opened his beak… then hesitated. Instead, he cleared his throat and lowered it again.

"I think you'd learn faster if I used your own feathers," he said.

"Hang on." She raised her claws. "You asked me what I know about birds. I just brushed over it. Perappu Says told me birds engage in… what did he call it?" She scratched her chin and looked up at the ceiling. "Mutual preening."

Waveform's cheeks flushed and he fell back from her. "What… ! How do you expect chicks to learn?"

"I ain't a chick," she said. "I'm technically an adult. And Perappu Says made it pretty darn clear that mutual preening is a mating ritual."

"What-?"

"No offence… but I ain't interested in that."

Waveform cleared his throat again and swiftly regained his composure. The surprise in his eyes hardened into seriousness and

he folded his wings neatly, uniformly.

"If you want to get into the technicalities," he said, "it is an affectionate thing. But also between friends and hatchlings. If you want to learn to tidy yourself up and fly, you need someone to teach you."

"What about Web?"

"Web isn't a bird."

"Po-ta-to, po-tah-to."

He narrowed his eyes and fell silent for a moment until he had her full attention.

"Do you want me to teach you or not?" he asked.

Her wings fell limp at her sides and she slumped. "Fine."

She turned her back on him and let him take her left wing in his.

"Just don't cut me with that metal thing on your face," she said.

"It's no more serrated than my beak is, don't worry."

"Then what's its purpose?" she asked.

He said nothing, taking two of her longer feathers in his beak and running them through. All she felt was a tug, and she watched as they smoothed out and knitted into place. He did this a couple more times until he was satisfied.

"See?" He said without looking up. "Now you try."

She shrugged and turned to her other wing. He didn't release her, working away at her 'primaries'. Another word coming back to her from her childhood books. She tried to copy him, getting much better results and less strands in her mouth. She wasn't sure whether or

not still being wet from the shower was helping, but it certainly looked smoother. Like when you wet your hair to smooth down the frizzy strays.

When she felt the cold metal brush her skin, she froze and snapped her head around to face him. He had his eyes closed, combing through the smaller feathers over her arm. She'd always been anxious of hair dressers nicking her with their deadly scissors as a child. But his precision felt more like a metal comb. She relaxed herself and returned to her work.

She was barely half done when Waveform released her and stood up. She looked from him to her wing, noting the tidy display of blue and yellow feathers.

"I think you get the idea." He turned to the door. "We'll try flying tomorrow morning. I'll be back shortly with some breakfast for you."

"No, I'll come with you." She tried to follow him, but he pulled the door shut before she could leave, wedging himself between the frame.

"You'll wait here," he said. "Give everyone a chance to cool down. I need to relieve Trojan from watching your captive. Be grateful I came here to talk to you instead of him."

"That bad, huh?" she asked.

He nodded then gestured to her bed. "Get some rest, then we'll all sit down and have a little chat."

The door closed behind him, and she stared at the bare, stained wood. Oh well. A good rest did sound like a grand idea. She hopped onto her bed and finished straightening her feathers out before clambering under the musty sheets.

…

As Wildcard Gamma dropped slowly towards the ground, Macro could make out more and more of the run-down rooftops of Spool City. The worn streets looked a sickly brown through the heavy smog, darkening to a black as his ship dropped a little lower.

DL stood beside him, her breathing noisy through her filter mask. He checked it was fastened properly around her antenna and then gave his own a second check over. It was more of a nervous tic. For the first time, he'd be taking DL onto System Ground. A place she'd not walked since her memories were taken away. A place she'd probably never seen with her own eyes, never even smelled, never once experienced except maybe for the faint smog one could see on the skyline from one of Meta City's skyscrapers.

It tied his stomach in knots.

He steadied himself onto the neon ladder and nodded for DL to join him. She clambered down until she was almost beside him, and he looked down at the ground below. He could feel her trembling. Heights? Anticipation? Maybe memories she'd not told him about? The entire ladder shook and he reached out a paw to pull her into himself, just in time for the neon bars to drop noisily towards the outskirts.

Wind whipped past his ears, blowing his long fur up over the goggles of his mask. DL screwed her eyes shut, cowering into him and clutching the ladder so tightly he could see her knuckles through her fur.

Before long, they were on solid ground. He offered his paw to help her down, then looked up and down the street. They'd been dropped just shy of an alley. If it weren't for the fact they were in Spool City, he'd have thought it an ideal hiding spot. But the trash cans were often teaming with trubbish and garbordor, and the drains were perfect lurking spots for grimer and muk as they spied on their rivals' turf.

He lifted his paw to activate his visor, but it was held firmly in place. He glanced down at DL's white paw still clasped around his. She wasn't looking at him, instead anxiously eyeing the buildings before them. Windows blocked off by curtains and wooden boards. Walls plastered with posters of wanted space pirates, both recent and long since captured. Several of them were for himself, some dating back to the days where he was only wanted for ten thousand credits.

It might only have been a mere couple of weeks, but those days felt long gone.

"She really doesn't like you, does she?" said DL.

Macro stared back at a poster of himself, frowning at his sneer. "No. She doesn't."

He steered her away from the space pirate montage and led her towards Meta City. His heart was in his throat, pulsing nauseatingly. He could see the skyscrapers dominating the skyline. Tatty rooftops backed by a pristine white, tinted yellow with the Spool City air. But beyond that he knew they were white. He'd seen them. He'd been there.

Deep voices reached his ears and he froze, straining through the green tint of his mask. He'd still not activated his visor. Spool City was unfamiliar to him. Unlike Proxy City, not many of Spool's inhabitants had hired him, so he'd had no reason to walk its streets.

The voices rose into a crescendo of shouts. Gang war, most likely. Nothing he wanted to be a part of. He ducked though a narrow alley and came out on the other side. He crouched against a boarded-up wall and wriggled his paw from DL's grasp. A quick flick of his ear piece and his visor flashed before his eyes. Maps. Maps was what he wanted. It took a moment to find it, but an outline of Spool City from the sky overlaid his view of the buildings. He let his paw relax to his side, where it was immediately snatched up by DL.

He restrained himself from looking at her, instead straining his ears to pick up those voices. They'd gone. All he could hear was the wind, and the flapping of hundreds of posters. Loud, papery flaps. Loud enough to drown out a quieter voice.

He straightened up, bracing himself to move, but no sooner was he back on his feet something wet slapped him across his mask. He beat it aside and stood back, watching as a damp poster for Giga Impact fluttered in the wind, torn right across the dates. Neatly. Something wasn't right. He stood back and looked up at the wall, taking in all the posters.

All of them flapped around noisily. Damp. Torn. Not untidily, either. Each cut was perfectly straight. Angled. Slices were cut out, littered along the damp sidewalk and plastered on the road. Every single poster had been sliced with the precision of a blade. And it wasn't just the posters either. The wall beyond it had also been sliced. Sliced like butter.

His eyes flew across each one, taking it in. Trying to fathom what in System could have done it. Various pokemon rolled through his mind. Pawniard and bisharp? Their claws weren't sharp enough to slice through brick or stone. Neither were skarmory, or scyther. Scizor could take out chunks, but not slices.

Something zipped past behind him, whipping up the air. He spun on the spot, searching the empty streets. On the other side, a curtain fluttered. He caught the flashing eyes of a dark furred meowth, before the curtain fell back into place. But they hadn't been watching him. He wasn't even sure they'd seen him.

He grabbed DL's paw and ducked back into the narrow alley, not taking his eyes off the vacant street.

Whatever it was whipped past again, in the same direction. Small. Glinting in the dull light. Then, like a flash, it was gone.

DL pressed herself up against him, fixing her terrified eyes on the street. Her breath came in quick bursts, and a couple of times he thought she was about to say something.

Then they saw it again. Retracing its footsteps. Slower. Slow enough to just make it out.

A small creature, far different from any pokemon he had seen before. Papery, but its limbs glistened in the weak sunlight. It turned away from them, zooming out of view.

Then he heard a scream. A blood curdling, terrified scream.

He instinctively fastened his arms around DL, pulling her into him. Her entire body trembled and she buried her face into his scarf. His heart was racing. He scanned the street, straining his ears, but nothing else came. No creatures. No voices. All he could hear was the fluttering of the posters.

One thing was for certain. They couldn't stay here. Not unprepared. If these were more of those Ultra Beasts, they needed to know exactly what they were and come back with the tools to deal with it. He took a steady breath and licked his dry lips as he removed one paw from DL to reach for his pouch.

Light footsteps exploded into the alley on his other side and he moved his paw from his pouch to his laser. He snapped his head around to spot the ruffian, but instead what he saw was a slender lopunny, her head covered with a filter mask. She stood with her back against the wall and something sparking in her right paw. He glanced down at it. A taser. Then back up at her. She'd spotted them. Her eyes went between the two of them, then over at the silent street. She lifted her free paw and gestured for them to join her.

Macro grit his teeth together, unseen beyond his mask, and shook his head slowly.

She lifted her paw to gesture again, more urgently this time.

Macro kept one eye on her and grabbed the butt of his laser, slowly dragging it from its holster. She watched him carefully, then took a step towards the alley mouth. Both her paws rose to her chest, still clutching the taser, but it was a defensive pose. Not a threatening one.

Then she wasn't a ruffian. Or if she was, she wasn't a very good one. He met her eyes, a pale rose colour, lit up with fear. A fear he'd not seen since he was a child, reflected in the eyes of his friend. A fear elicited by a monster.

It stunned him, as though he'd been shot through the chest. He released his gun and relaxed his hold on DL, falling slightly against the wall. The lopunny lowered her weapon and tiptoed around the garbage towards him. She lowered her head to his, keeping both eyes on the vacant street.

"It's not safe here," she whispered. "Come with me."

Macro stared up at her, narrowing his eyes with confusion. There was something about that voice…

DL pulled back from him and took his paw again, guiding him after the lopunny. The lopunny paused occasionally to look around, her long ears slightly raised. Then she ducked out of the mouth of the alley, turning a sharp right. Macro followed after her, keeping at DL's side. His paw found his laser again, and he searched the walls for any sign of damage. The further they followed the stranger, the more posters were torn. Ominously flapping in the wind, like the clapping of an invisible audience. It chilled him.

The lopunny stopped beside a rundown building, and Macro paused to take it in. She fumbled with a set of keys, too many for one lone building. The building had no sign. It stood between a boarded-up shop filled with sliced up posters. On the other side was a club that looked like it hadn't been frequented much in years. One thing about the lopunny's chosen residence struck him. Painted across the wall in scarlet paint were the words 'shove off shamus'.

Macro's mouth went dry.

The lopunny finally got the door open and stood aside, ushering the space pirate inside. He frowned up at her, but lurched forwards as DL dragged him after her. The lopunny was on his back in a flash, shoving him into the building. As she slammed the door, Macro spotted one of the creatures zipping past the window. If it had seen them, it didn't show any interest. A neat clipping from one of the posters drifted down like a fallen feather onto the street.

Macro turned back to their rescuer and folded his arms. "Mind telling me what a detective is doing saving my ass?"

"Oh, I think that's fairly self explanatory," said the lopunny.

She unbuckled her mask and pulled it over her head, shaking her ears into place. Then she fixed her rose coloured eyes onto his.

Macro's jaw almost struck the floor and he staggered back, groping for a chair. Failing to find one, he slid down against a desk. DL crouched beside him to try and drag him back to his feet, but his legs wouldn't obey. He stumbled over his words, unable to take his eyes off the rabbit pokemon.

"Digit?" he gasped out.

DL snapped her head around to look at him, then spun to face the lopunny.

"Long time no see, Hunter." The lopunny kicked herself back into one of the office seats and set her mask on her desk. "But it isn't 'Digit' anymore. I go by Defrag now. Welcome to Spool City's little undercover detective agency."

…

Did anyone see that little twist coming? I'd been planning that for a while! XD Please R&R! =D

Chapter 53

A/N - This is a day early, as I have to proof read the special episode for Monday, and it's quite long! Also… I'm just super excited to get this chapter up, followed by The Wonderland Episode ;) Chapter Fifty Four will be posted next Saturday as usual!

Chapter Fifty Three

It was all Macro could do to stare at the lopunny. Sitting there, staring back at him, was a former member of his crew. A pokemon who'd left him because he was 'too reckless'. The very pokemon who'd left him feeling wounded and heartbroken. And now she was living in Spool City, as a detective, rounding up ruffians and space pirates.

He snapped his jaw together and flashed a canine as he tried to lever himself up on DL's offered arm. A pointless expression since Defrag couldn't see his face.

"So what's this?" he asked. "Trying to reform yourself? Gotta say, I didn't think a former space pirate could get a leg up in law enforcement."

"You just need to know the right pokemon." Defrag turned her chair to face her desk and idly tapped at her keyboard. "Some offer you the chance to reform yourself."

"And Socket is fine with that?" he spat.

"Socket doesn't know I used to work for you," she said. "Fortunately for your crew, after your little fiery feat only your face was plastered all over System Ground. I managed to get away from that by the skin of my teeth."

DL lowered her head to his. "What's she talking about?"

"It doesn't matter." He took the pachirisu's paw and made for the door. "Come on, we're heading back."

"Oh it does matter." Defrag span her chair around and flicked one of her long ears over the back of it. "So you go and drag another girl into your little exploits and refuse to tell her anything? Typical."

"Just drop it, Digit!"

He flashed a snarl at her, keeping his free paw on the door handle. His heart was hammering in his chest as he tried to mentally shake off the flashbacks. Defrag's demeanour softened and she looked between the two of them. DL struggled in his grip and he became aware he was almost crushing her paw. He relaxed his grip and fired her a sideways glance.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"Huh. Would you look at that." Defrag crossed one leg over the other and twirled back towards her desk. "I assumed you enjoyed causing trouble. I guess I was mistaken."

He stared at the back of her head for a moment, trying to piece everything together. Things hadn't ended well. The last time he'd seen her, she'd been calling him every name under the sun. Now she had him in a detective's office, and she wasn't even watching him.

A smirk tugged at his lips and he secured his grip on the door handle. "You're not a very good detective, are you? You're just gonna let me go?"

"Not exactly."

He twisted the handle and tugged, but it wouldn't budge. His eyes snapped back to it and he tried again, jerking it up and down in a vain attempt to jiggle the door open.

"I've locked it." She turned back to him and ran a paw over one of her long ears. "You really think I'm going to let you go when that creature is still out there?"

"Alright. So you've got me." He shrugged. "Forty thousand credits standing in your office. But I have you know, I am armed."

"So what? So am I." She shrugged. "But I know for certain you'd never shoot a girl. That's the only noble thing about you."

Every hair along Macro's spine stood on end. "Only noble thing…" He narrowed his eyes at the lopunny and pointed a claw at her. "I saved your life!"

Defrag rolled her eyes. "We all know why you saved my life, little mawile! But you don't go around saving lives. You're a criminal, not a hero."

"I'm not gonna stand here and take this." He reached into his belt for his gun and aimed it at the door.

"You damage that, you're paying for it," said Defrag.

"Look, I don't need to redeem myself to you," he said. "And I ain't payin' for a manky door. I've got a job to do, and right now you're stopping me from doing it." He tapped the door with the nozzle of his laser. "Open it, or I'll blast it off its hinges."

Defrag watched him curiously and flicked her ear again. "What job have you got here in Spool City? A deal in black sludge? Poison barbs? Some ruffian owe you a favour?"

He let out a bitter laugh. "Not this time, sweetheart. I'm gettin' rid of those beasts."

Her eyes widened briefly, but she quickly regained her composure. "Really? You? Fighting those bladed monsters? I've watched them cut pokemon down. What could you possibly do?"

"Find out where they're coming from, for one thing." He glanced towards DL and let his gun fall to his side. "Given what we know about it, any chance you can tell me which one it is? Might dictate which laser I use."

"Easily," said DL. "I read about each one in detail last night."

DL had both Macro's and Defrag's attention, the latter with a look of surprise.

"There's only one that fits a bladed description," said DL. "It's name is Kartana. Steel and grass type. It can cut through metal and rock with its limbs, but is so light it rivals gastly in weight."

"So if we face it head on it turns us into sashimi." Macro flexed his claws over the butt of his gun and looked back at the door. "Not one of us has a type advantage against that thing. I guess we're relying on fire power. Ground laser it is." He loaded up his ground type module with a flick of a claw.

"Interesting." Defrag tapped her claws over her folded arm. "You appear to know a lot about these things. Now I'm even more reluctant to let you go."

"Well, if you don't let us go, we can't round them up," said Macro. "And I don't really wanna stay. You've got one more chance to open the door."

Defrag pursed her lips together, not taking her eyes off him. He sighed and lifted his gun to the door again.

"Don't shoot," said Defrag. "I'll let you out. But only if you tell me why you're really here, and how you know so much."

"I told you. I'm rounding up those beasts."

"So you're trying to be a hero? Trying to fight something that is clearly much more powerful than you? If your little friend is right, then

those things can cut through you as though you're nothing."

"I'm aware of that! I ain't goin' in there unprepared," he said. "I've been told to do this."

"By who? The Mayor?"

He snorted and tucked his gun away. "No. You're kiddin' right?"

"Then who?" Defrag asked. "Did someone in Spool City hire you?"

"Gotta be honest with ya, my first port of call wasn't actually Spool City. I was headin' for Meta City to look at those electric beasts. Find out what the damage is, and where they're comin' from."

"I can tell you all of that from right here." Defrag twisted back to her computer and tapped at her keyboard, bringing up a news article. "They've traced their origin back to some strange porthole in one of the back alleys. From that evidence alone, it's pretty obvious they're not from this world."

Macro darted to her side and leant on the desk, skimming over the information. It was all there, detailing the porthole complete with its swirling mist. There was no picture to prove its existence, but he didn't need one. Neither did DL or the rest of Wildcard Gamma.

"That sounds exactly like the one Switch came through," said DL.

Macro nodded silently.

"Who?" Defrag looked down at them and frowned. "You've seen this porthole?"

"Not this one exactly." Macro pushed himself back from the desk. "But if there's one in Meta City, there might be one in Spool n'all. I say we find it."

"And then what?" DL asked. "How do you suppose we close it? You know they pull us in!"

Macro sighed and let his paws fall at his sides. She was right. They couldn't close them. He looked back at her and shrugged his shoulders.

"But at least we'd know where it is," he said. "Easier to track down and get those creatures back home."

"All right!" Defrag rose to her feet and placed a paw on her hip. "I want to know exactly what's going on. If it weren't for seeing those creatures with my own eyes, I'd think you were pulling my leg! If you know something, you tell us. System has a right to know."

Macro chuckled and folded his arms. "Why exactly?"

"So the Mayor can do something about it!"

"The Mayor is the reason it's happening!" Macro threw his paws wide. "If System needs to know anything, it's that!"

Defrag's jaw dropped and she stared down at him, dumbfounded. Her eyes narrowed slightly and she shook her head.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"It's a long story, I ain't got time." He nodded to the door. "Open that or I'll whip out my old, tried and tested method."

"Nutshell it," she said. "Then I'll open the door."

Macro took a deep breath and placed a paw over his mask. "Okay, fine! But you better keep it to yourself. I don't wanna be responsible for a rebellion."

Defrag merely nodded.

"Socket is tryin' to tear open time and space," he began, "in a bid to find a new world to settle in. But only the rich will get a look in. She's gonna leave everyone else - the poor, the criminals and the space pirates - right here to suffer in all this rot."

Defrag stared down at him, meeting his eyes. Her expression was unreadable, and he braced himself for a string of accusations. His paw went back to his laser and he cast a fleeting glance to the door.

"I believe you," she said.

He snapped his head back around to face her and his jaw fell open. She believed him? Had he heard that correctly?

She shrugged. "What can I say? I've come across some information recently that's left me rather sceptical of Socket. I won't go into details, but you telling me she's responsible for these creatures… I can't doubt that."

"So workin' for the law hasn't changed your opinion, eh?"

Defrag turned back to her desk and reached beneath it. A sharp click came from the door. Macro drew his laser and crept over to it, straining his ears to hear outside.

"I'm not letting you go alone," she said. "If there really is a porthole somewhere in Spool City, I'm going to help you find it."

"Sure," said Macro. "You go one way, DL and I will go the other."

She let out a single laugh. "I might not be afraid to hunt around Spool City alone, but there's safety in numbers. From what I've heard, there are two of those beasts. Three of us versus two of them? I think we'll have the upper paw."

Macro turned back to her and leant against the door, folding his arms. A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"Let me tell you somethin', sweetheart," he said. "It took four ships and a small army to take out one of those… Ultra Beasts. That's their name, all right? They come in many shapes and sizes. This one was all tentacled. You probably read about it."

"I did."

"Well. Wildcard Gamma, three other ships, a small army… and it took out two ships. One creature took out two ships! So don't underestimate these things."

"Given one destroyed an entire city, that's not all that difficult to believe," she said. "So wouldn't it make more sense to stick together?"

"Wouldn't make an ounce of difference."

"I think it would." She frowned down at him and inclined her head on one side. "Now. Tell me, where did you find out their name? Or is 'Ultra Beast' something you space pirates have coined? 'Cos it sure isn't on any websites."

"I ain't got time to explain."

"Nutshell it."

Macro rolled his eyes and threw his paws in the air. "Fine! Socket's pesky creation named 'em. The thing she's got opening these portholes. Can we go?"

He jabbed a thumb towards the door and turned on his heel, tugging the door open. Putrid air assaulted him instantly, permeating the mask. He did his best not to cough, and frowned up and down the empty street.

"Sure is quiet, huh?" he said. "Don't like it."

"No one wants to come outside because of those beasts," said Defrag. "The sooner we find out where they're coming from, the better."

"Well, if no one wants to come outside then it gives me less oppression to deal with." He stepped out into the street, keeping his gun cocked and ready. "I'm surprised something part grass type is willing to stick around in all this pollution."

Defrag stepped out beside him and locked the door. "If they're not from this world, who's to say their typings work the same way ours do?"

"No clue."

Macro moved away from her, ushering DL beside him. The only sounds were the flapping of torn posters and the breeze stirring litter along the gutter. He paused beside the alley they'd previously lurked in, straining to see through to the other side. That's where they'd seen the creatures. Were they still there?

One of the trash cans rustled and wobbled. He aimed his laser at it and took a step back. The lid cracked open, revealing the yellowed eyes of a tired trubbish. They widened and fixed on his laser, then vanished back into the trash can. The lid clattered closed behind him before teetering towards the floor. The trubbish reached out a tentacle to grab it and tugged the lid back in place with a loud clang.

"Already terrorising the locals, I see?" Defrag stopped beside Macro and nodded towards the end of the alley. "That's where they've been seen the most. If you're going to find those beasts, that street is your best bet."

"I'd rather find their way home first," he said. "That way we can herd them towards it."

"But what if it's that way?" DL nodded towards the street. "If they've been seen there the most, they might be sticking close to their way home."

"And willingly stay in System?" Macro snorted. "I'm gonna bet they're lost. But if you both believe we should check there first, then by all means."

He strutted along the alley, hopping over fallen trash bags that Defrag managed to tiptoe around with ease. The parallel street was just as quiet. It chilled him.

He looked up and down it, the fur on the back of his neck standing on end. The fluttering of the posters sounded like a thunder clap. To his left, a drain gurgled noisily for a good, long minute before fizzling out to a trickle.

"Cap'n?" Anchor's voice resounded in his ear. "How are ya gettin' on?"

"We're still in Spool City," Macro said back quietly. "Apparently they've got their own little Ultra Beast invasion."

"Really?" said Anchor. "What about Meta City?"

"Meta City can wait a while. They already know where their porthole is. I'm gonna search out this one."

"Alright. Keep me posted."

Defrag and DL looked at him expectantly. Macro shrugged and gestured with his laser to get moving. He gave the noisy drain a wide berth and cast a quick glance down another alley. Everything was so quiet. It was like a ghost town. If it weren't for the curious eyes peeking through windows, he'd think the place were deserted.

Killed off by the kartana.

He swallowed dryly and looked up at the sky. Just through the smog he could make out Wildcard Gamma. A huge shadow casting a wave of reassurance over him.

The kartana could cut through steel. They were as light as a gastly, if not lighter. But how high could they fly? Could they cut down Wildcard Gamma?

He tore his eyes off the ship and focused on moving forward. The wind was picking up again, stirring the posters beside him. He looked over at the street at a sliced up billboard, no longer playing its club animation. Wind whipped past his face and he stood aside,

catching the glint as something sharp darted through the air. A few black strands of fur drifted after it before vanishing into the wind.

Defrag and DL joined his side, each of them clutching their own laser. The three of them cast their eyes around them as the wind picked up again.

"Duck!" shouted Defrag.

The trio crouched to the ground and a shrill whistle cut the air as another kartana swept overhead, narrowly missing his horn.

"They're too fast!" said DL. "We can't fight them like this. We need to slow them down!"

"Got any electrical attacks that can do that?" Defrag asked, firing a blind stream of fire in the direction of the kartana.

DL shook her head. "I've not tried."

"Now is as good a time as an-ahh!" Defrag ducked again, raising her paws over her head.

There was the sound of metal against metal, and when Macro opened his eyes he spotted the nozzle of her laser bounce across the tarmac. Defrag looked down at her ruined gun then looked after the kartana.

It was doubling back, its limbs outstretched like wings. Paper thin, glinting in the dim light.

"Step back," Macro said, rising to his feet. "I've got this."

He fired his gun, sending a stream of dirt towards the kartana. The attack struck the ground, creating a geyser of mud and tarmac. The kartana rose higher into the air, dodging the attack with nimble grace, and arced over his head towards the rooftops.

"You're going to bring the city down!" Defrag snapped.

"Shut up and let me do my job!" Macro rounded towards the kartana and fired off another beam.

He didn't know if it was his attack or the Ultra Beast, but the chimney slid from the roof and clattered to the floor in a shower of brick and mortar.

Macro wiped his paw across the goggles of his mask and strained to see through the dust cloud. He could still hear it, slicing through the air as it danced around him. He caught a glimpse of it and aimed his gun, but it vanished before he could pull the trigger. Then again, to his left. Then his right.

There was more than one.

His heart sank and he took a step back towards his allies. Defrag with her fire laser down. DL with nothing but a water and grass laser, neither of which could do anything to the kartana.

It was just him. One small mawile against two… no, three… four? Ultra Beasts that could slice through steel.

"There's too many," he said quickly. "We're gonna have to bail."

He pushed the button on his ear piece just as one of the kartana zipped towards him. He spun aside, firing his laser blindly. The creature zig-zagged away from him, spinning off balance in the air. He'd just clipped it.

"Cap'n?" came Anchor's voice.

"Send down the ladder," said Macro.

He ducked again then looked up into the air. The ladder wasn't coming down on their street? He grit his teeth together and grabbed DL's paw. Then he turned to Defrag.

"Move it!" he barked.

He took off down the alley, pushing DL ahead of him. When they got to the alley mouth, his eyes went instantly towards the ladder. He almost threw DL at it before diving after her. Something flashed to his right and his eyes flew wide open. His gun clattered to the floor and he brought his paws to his chest, catching the kartana's limbs in his paws. His back struck the floor, knocking the wind out of his lungs. He kicked his feet into the air and threw himself backwards, throwing the kartana over his head. Then he brought his horn up in an arc, smacking it square across the body. The sharp Ultra Beast flew back the way it came.

Macro wiped his bleeding paws onto his scarf, retrieved his fallen weapon and turned back to the ladder. DL was still waiting at the bottom of it, her eyes wide and frantic. Defrag stood beside her front door, fumbling in her pouch for her key card. But she didn't take her eyes off him or DL.

He clenched his paws into fists to stem the bleeding and bolted for the ladder. He shouted at DL to get on, throwing a paw at her to make his point. He could hear that whistle of air being sliced, growing in intensity. Crouching, he threw himself at the ladder, reaching for it.

The whistle stopped, and he was knocked to the ground. He heard his laser skitter across the tarmac.

"Macro!" DL dropped from the ladder.

The kartana was on him, but it felt no heavier than a large sheet of paper. He tried to take a breath, bracing himself to launch it off him with a swing of his horn. But his breath cut off as his entire mouth filled with metallic blood. Then he felt it shift. A searing, hot pain as it pulled its limb free from his body.

DL picked up his laser, aiming it at the Ultra Beast. He watched her, pleading with his eyes. He opened his mouth to shout 'no', but all that came out was a strained gag.

She fired, blasting the creature from his back in a spray of dirt. It seared across his body, and he screwed his eyes shut. Everything hurt. It hurt to breathe. He could feel blood pooling in his mask as it looked for a way out, clogging up the filter.

The last thing he saw was DL and Defrag rushing to his side before his world went black.

…

What will happen to our favourite space pirate? Will he survive? D= Please R&R!

Special - Macro in Wonderland

A/N - Here it is! A semi-canon special. Crack-fiction, if you will. Prepare for some craziness!

I have a few specials planned, but not all of them are canon. This one isn't 100% canon, but it gives you a glimpse into Macro's psyche. Unless there's a demand for me to post all specials (including the Serebii Fanfiction Forum exclusive Christmas special I did last year) then I won't be posting the non-canon ones here. Please let me know in a review.

(I do not own Alice in Wonderland or Pokemon! I just love them both and threw them together in a glorious crack-fic frenzy!)

Special Episode - Macro in Wonderland

When Macro opened his eyes, everything was dark. Cold, damp grass tickled his paw pads, and dew soaked through the fur of his stomach. Somewhere nearby, there was water. The sea? A lake? It swept back and forth, gently lapping some unseen land. He blinked his eyes a few times, allowing them to adjust to the darkness, before pushing himself to his feet. His head hurt. His body hurt. What had happened?

He smoothed out his scarf and looked up at the sky. Stars. Twinkling and… moving? Their patterns were erratic, but they cast a dim glow down onto his surroundings, reflecting off miles and miles of water. He looked down at his feet, hidden among long grass. But all around him was water. What little island he was standing on, it wasn't much bigger than himself.

"Oi!"

His head snapped back up, meeting a pair of angry, glittering eyes leering at him from the water. The head was both avian and reptilian,

flashing two rows of sharp teeth.

"If you're gonna cry that much, at least warn a girl first!" The bird thing pulled a wing from the water, yellow feathers dripping wet. "Look what you've gone and did!"

Macro blinked down at her. An archeops? Weren't they extinct? Where on earth was he? He looked around again. What he'd mistaken for stars were a swarm of volbeat and illumise desperately fleeing the water. They gathered in the branches of trees stretching up from the lake, or congregated in roots that expanded above him like the roof of a splendid, ancient, underground palace.

"Where am I?" His voice came out hoarse and he coughed into his paw. "Where are my friends?"

"Friends?" the archeops scoffed. "You mean there's more of you crybabies?"

"Annie!" A skuntank paddled towards her, and it took a moment for Macro to realise she was riding on a huge book. There was a grinning cat on the cover. "Oh, thank goodness you're okay."

"I'm fine! Just a little wet." The archeops blinked at him before climbing aboard the skuntank's book-boat. "So what's your story, shorty? What made you cry so much?"

"'Shorty'?!" Macro spat.

The archeops merely nodded.

"All right. Well… I don't remember." Macro looked down at the lake and shook his head. "I really haven't a clue."

"Really? 'Cos it looks to me like you've been put through the ringer." She paused and lifted a claw. "Actually, that ain't a bad idea. Anyone got a mangle? That aughta get us dry quick."

The skuntank frowned at her. There were now two other pokemon on her book. A scrafty and a small, purple creature Macro didn't recognise.

"A mangle's a bit old fashioned, ain't it?" said the scrafty.

"I am not being squeezed through a mangle!" Macro rubbed his ribs. "I already feel like I've got a chest infection. I ain't adding broken ribs to that list."

"Spoilsport." Annie folded her wings. "All right then, plan B. Stand aside, we're gonna climb aboard and run in circles 'til we're dry."

Something white fluttered in the distance, snatching Macro's attention from the archeops. A fluffy, blue and white tail vanished beneath the water, sending his heart into his throat.

"DL?" he gasped.

"Eh?" Annie snapped her head towards him, half on and half off the little island. "I said 'circle'. I suggest you start runnin' too, else you'll never get dry."

"No, I'd rather not," said Macro. "I need to get off this island and catch her before she drowns."

"There's no way off," said Annie. "You'll be swimmin' for days."

"Good thing I can swim then, ain't it?" He put one toe in the water and grimaced. "Wow, that's cold."

Before he could drop his entire weight onto one leg, the entire water surged. He let out a squeak as something hidden beneath the surface dragged him across the lake and away from the island. He glanced back, wanting to scream for help, but Annie and her friends were busy running in tight circles around the rapidly shrinking island. He turned back to face where he was going and screamed. The water moved down, away from him like a waterfall. Before he could

fully process his potential demise, the water launched him over the edge and he landed flat on his face on a cold, tiled floor.

"What in the world?" He pushed himself to his feet and rubbed his sore nose. "This is not a good day."

Somewhere, a door slammed. He spun on the spot to locate it, taking in his surroundings. Wherever the waterfall had launched him, it wasn't a beach or a river bed. Black and white tiles stretched out before him like a chessboard. The entire hallway was filled with doors - huge, towering doors - and at the far end was a red curtain. With all those doors, finding which one had slammed shut would be nigh impossible. And there was no sign of DL. He looked back up, but all he saw was a ceiling. No water. No waterfall. And no way to reach it even if there were. The hallway was bare save for a small, glass table. Well, given the size of the hallway, it looked small. It actually towered over Macro's head. Through the glass, he could see a lone key.

"Well, that's a bit rotten," he muttered. "Guess it opens one of these doors. But there's more than one way to get that key down."

He reached for his laser and gasped. His paw fastened around nothing. He twisted to check his belt, grimacing at the effort. Two holsters and nothing in them. Where on earth were his lasers?! He'd never felt more exposed.

He groaned and turned away from the table to the doors. He wasn't even going to try and climb it. Maybe the doors weren't even locked? He trotted to the nearest one and groped for the doorknob… except it didn't have one. He craned his neck back to look up at it, seeing if it had been placed mockingly out of his reach. But it hadn't. There was, in fact, no doorknob. Just a keyhole. He muttered under his breath and checked another door. Same result.

So all the massive doors held their keyholes well out of his reach, and the key was placed atop a huge table. He was beginning to feel very claustrophobic. He absently rubbed his chest, giving the hallway

a disheartened glance. Then his eyes fell on the curtain. He half-ran, half-skidded down the hallway towards it and wrenched it aside. A door! A normal-sized door! A mawile-sized door! With a doorknob! He grabbed it in both paws and twisted. It didn't budge. He jiggled it a bit. Nothing. Then he saw the keyhole just below the doorknob.

"Drat!"

He spun on the spot to face the table, now seeming so far away. Still tall, still holding a key. And there was no way he could reach it.

"Somewhere," he said, "a sadist is laughing."

He strutted over to the table, keeping his eye on the key. There had to be some way to get it back down. As he stared at it, it began to grow closer. And… smaller? Before he knew it, he was staring down at the table, hunched over in the now minuscule hallway.

"What is happening?!" he roared.

"Oi!" Annie's archeops face poked through the tiny door. "Would you keep it down? I'm trying to hold a chess tournament in here!"

He stared at her, aghast. A small draft stirred his fur from the open door. Oh, how he desperately wanted to bolt through it. But there was no way he'd fit now. He couldn't even fit his paw through.

"Sod your chess tournament!" he said. "I'm stuck in here!"

She made a thoughtful noise and inclined her head on one side. "You clearly didn't take me calling you 'shorty' very well, did you?"

He flashed a canine and growled. "I'd rather be short than folded up in this corridor like a deck chair! Get help!"

"Sorry, can't," she said. "But before you go cryin' again, take this. It might bring things back down to size a bit."

She tossed a wing into the air and vanished back through the door. Something small and round bounced along the floor to stop at his hip. He stared down at it and his heart sank.

An onion. Attached to it was a gift tag that read 'eat me'.

He picked it up in his claws, and its skin crunched under his touch.

"You have to be kiddin' me?" The thought of eating the thing whole, and raw, made him briefly consider remaining stuck in the hallway. But it was getting hard to breathe. "Oh well. You only live once, huh?"

Given it was much too small to faff around with peeling, he tossed the whole thing into his mouth and swallowed it like a tablet. Then gagged.

"All right," he choked. "Maybe next time, just peel the wretched thing."

He deeply hoped there'd never be a next time.

The walls began to grow, as did the doors. And the glass table.

"Oh no. I'm not letting this chance get away."

He pushed himself to his feet and swiped the key in his left paw, then bailed towards the red curtain. As he lowered the key, it jerked in his paw and he snapped his head down towards it. A klefki struggled in his grip, its eyes closed tight as it struggled to pull the key free.

"Hey!" he snapped. "Let go! I'm using this!"

"But it's mine!" the klefki wailed.

"I'll give it back! Now let go!"

Macro snatched the key back, sending the keychain pokemon rolling away from him through the air. He turned back to the door and

realised with a sinking heart that he was still shrinking. He stood on tiptoes, jammed the key in the lock and twisted. The door swung away from him, revealing a lush garden. He tossed the key back towards the klefki and raced into the open air.

"I'm free!" he shouted. "I'm free!"

Long grass tickled through his fur as he raced between manicured flower beds. Bugs hummed in the air and the sweet smell of nectar filled his nose. Tall flowers swayed from side to side, almost looking at him. In fact… they were. The large faces of vibrant coloured florges stared down at him, frowning.

"Rowdy little bug, isn't he?" one of them asked the other.

"A bug?" said another. "He has no wings, and too few legs. I'd say he's a weed."

"Oh yes," said a pink florges. "Much too ugly to be a garden flower."

"Yes, a common weed," said the second one.

Macro glared up at them. "Excuse me?"

"Oh." The first florges lifted her arms to cover her mouth. "I think we offended it."

"Worry not, dear sister," said the third one. "I'll call for the weed spray."

Macro knew when he wasn't wanted. He turned and raced through the flower beds towards the trees. The manicured beds gave way to a field dotted with sparse woodland and fruit baring trees. Huge mushrooms rose up on either side of him, florescent in the dim light. Amongst them, a thin trail of smoke rose into the sky.

"Well, I think I'm far enough away from the psychotic flowers." He sank to his bottom with his back against a mushroom. "I think I need a rest to figure this out. Now… what did I eat last?"

"An onion, I'm guessing."

Macro waved a paw. "Well, aside from that. What could have caused this trippy dream?"

"What makes you think it's a dream?"

Macro was about to answer when words froze in his throat. He craned his neck around to spot the speaker. Atop one of the smaller mushrooms sat a small, green bug pokemon. The sewaddle stared back at him, holding a hookah pipe in one little leg. He blew a stream of smoke from his mouth, that formed a huge question mark above his little head.

"Worm?" Macro gasped.

"I know not of this Worm," said the sewaddle. "I'm a mere, humble caterpillar." He took a long drag of his hookah then frowned at Macro. "Now, what in the world are you?"

"I'm a mawile," said Macro. "Come on, Worm! You know me!"

"I do not know you, and you didn't answer my question." Worm narrowed his eyes. "What… are… you?"

A sickly green question mark flew at Macro's face. He coughed and wafted it away. "I told you I'm a mawile! A space pirate! A rogue of the skies! Did you hit your head or somethin'?"

"My head is fine." Worm returned to his hookah. "It is yours that is not."

Macro hissed through his teeth and folded his arms, scanning the mushrooms for any hint that Worm might have ingested something that sent him loopy.

"All this aside," said Macro, "do you know where my crew might have gone? Or where I am? Like… what city is this? Where in System are we?"

"I did not say we could shove the matter aside," said Worm. "As for where we are, we are amongst mushrooms."

"I can see that. What city?"

Worm took a long drag of his hookah and slowly breathed out a stream of smoke. It formed a huge heart in the sky, then deformed into a grinning hoopa.

"I haven't a clue," he said.

"You don't even know how we got here?"

"Oh, I know how I got here," said Worm. "I woke up this morning on this mushroom like I do every morning. As for you…"

"I feel like I fell." Macro rubbed his ribs. "Or something punched me."

"'Fell' is more likely," said Worm. "That happens when you go tumbling through rings and wormholes."

Macro frowned and looked over at the mushrooms. Lots of them had holes in. With bite-marks. Was Worm being jokingly literal?

"I don't recall any rings, or wormholes," said Macro. "I just woke up in a lake."

"That explains why you look wet."

"Exactly." Macro paused. "But I haven't a clue what happened leading up to all this!"

"Maybe you hit your head."

Macro reached up and rubbed beneath his goggles. Then he straightened them out. His head didn't feel sore, so he could rule that one out. Right?

"You look concerned," said Worm. "Let's see if we can figure out why you are clearly having memory loss. Recite 'How Doth the Little…' for me."

Macro raised an eyebrow. "Eh?"

"No, not 'How Doth the Little E'!" Worm took a huge drag on his hookah. "Try again."

Macro wound his scarf in his paws, fixing the sewaddle in a violet glare. All the bug pokemon did was stare back, nibbling the end of his pipe. Macro let out a resigned sigh and threw his arms in the air.

"Fine. 'How doth the little krookodile improve his shining tail-'"

"Wrong!" Worm blew out a huge, red cross. "It has nothing to do with krookodile or tails. Besides, who dragged shiny pokemon into all this? What makes them so special?"

Macro's jaw dropped.

Worm turned his nose into the air. "Try again."

"No!" said Macro. "I am done playing your games! I'm not gonna continue makin' a fool of myself reciting non-existent poetry!"

"Why not?" A question mark flew from Worm's mouth.

"Because it's silly! And I have friends to look for. I saw DL, but I lost her and have to search for her in all… all this!" He spread his arms over the field of mushrooms. "And right now I'm a measly what… three inches high?"

"That is a splendid height."

"No it's not! I hate being so small! I can't even reach the key on the table! Just get me out of this nightmare and back to normal height!"

Worm's face turned red and the smoke surrounding him formed lightning bolts. "What is wrong with being small?!"

Macro stuttered and took two steps back. He'd seen Worm angry before, but this was a whole other form of angry. The bug pokemon's back prickled and his eyes began to glow yellow. Even the milky one with his everstone.

"I'd say three inches is a very grand height indeed!" Worm exploded in a flash of light.

Macro ducked, raising his paws over his head, but all that flew over him was smoke and glitter. He looked back up, spotting Worm's face hovering above him. Out of his back sprouted a pair of butterfree wings.

"What the…" Macro muttered. He rose to his feet and pointed a claw at Worm. "That's not even the right freakin' evolution! If my dreams are gonna be wacko, they should at least get their science right!"

"Science is nought but a myth," said Worm. "You need to take in what's around you and accept the extraordinary."

"What are you wafflin' about?!"

"If you hate being small," said Worm, "then maybe you should turn to the trees?"

The sewaddle-butterfree fluttered away from him, abandoning his hookah to the mushrooms. The odd contraption slowly sank into the mushroom's cap, leaving behind a gnarly hole. Macro frowned and turned to the trees. His heart sank. Whatever was growing in them, it wasn't apples.

Onions hung from the branches like baubles, looking as out of place as Worm's sudden wings. Both red and white, growing on the same trees. He sighed and picked up a stone, lobbing it at the vegetables. Two of them broke loose and thudded to the floor, narrowly missing

his toes. He skittered backwards, then stooped to grab them. One red and one white. What were the odds? He shrugged it off and shoved them into his pouch.

"Dunno what he were goin' on about," he said. "But since the last one helped me to shrink back down, maybe these might get me out of some tricky situations n'all."

…

The field of mushrooms felt like it went on forever. Each one cast a neon purple glow, giving the entire stretch an unearthly feel. When Macro finally spotted the roof of a house rising over the mushrooms, he found a renewed vigour. Trotting through the multicoloured stalks, he found his way onto a path and almost skidded to a halt. Just ahead of him sprinted a frogadier, clutching a huge envelope beneath one arm.

"Jumper?" Macro gasped, taking off after him.

The frog pokemon ran at such a pace Macro felt his legs might fall off. His breath came out in raspy bursts and he lifted a paw, screwing his eyes shut as he tried to find his second wind.

"Jumper! Wait!"

The frogadier looked over his shoulder and 'hmm'd', hopping to a stop. "Are you shouting for me, good fellow?"

"Of course I am!" Macro stopped before him, placing his paws on his knees as he tried to catch his breath. "Boy, can you run!"

"That's because I'm in a rush," said Jumper. "So if you could make this quick?"

Macro looked up at him then slowly straightened up. "Can you tell me where we are? Like… what's going on? Where's DL and the rest of my crew?"

"We're at the Duchess' house," said Jumper. "And I'm delivering an important message from the Queen. So if you don't mind-"

Macro grabbed his arm before he could sprint off again. "And DL?"

"I don't know any DL."

Macro's heart sank like a lead brick and he released the frogadier's arm. First Worm and now Jumper? No… something was very amiss.

Jumper nodded to the little house. "I'll be off now, shall I?"

Macro waved a paw and let him go. The frogadier sprinted at an unbelievable speed towards the door, and threw the letter through the mail box like a ninja star. Then he leapt into the air, bounding over the roof out of sight.

"Curiouser and curiouser." Macro cleared his throat and ventured towards the house.

He lifted his paw to knock, then a sharp rap at the door took him by surprise. He stared at it. Did someone just knock from inside? He knocked back, only to get another knock in return. Muttering under his breath, he twisted the handle and pushed it open. Then ducked. A saucepan whizzed over his head to vanish into the mushroom field.

"What the…?"

He removed his paws from his head and peered into the house. It was just one room. A large sofa spread out at his left, with a very noisy chingling sat upon it. He wailed with laughter, his bell jingling loudly. Beside him sat a very disgruntled zigzagoon Macro recognised in an instant. But before her name could leave his mouth, someone sneezed and another saucepan soared over his head. He spotted the culprit by the stove. Cookie waddled back and forth, throwing pepper left and right in a bid to season some unseen dish. The cloud of pepper spread to the sofa, causing the chingling to fall

into a sneezing fit. Surge refused to look up from her book, frowning at the pages.

"Cookie?" Macro gasped.

The slurpuff didn't look up from his preparations. A cloud of pepper wafted from the shaker, sending him into his own sneezing fit. He launched a plate in frustration. It narrowly missed Surge's ear then shattered against the wall, scattering porcelain in all directions. The zigzagoon didn't appear to notice.

Macro ducked into the house and closed the door behind him. An idea he soon regretted, as Surge looked up from her book and trapped him with her eyes. He swallowed a nervous lump in his throat and reached for his missing laser.

"What?" he growled. "Gonna kill me?"

"No." She looked back down at her book. "I might kill this annoying chingling though, if he doesn't stop laughing."

The chingling rolled onto his back and kicked his tiny legs in the air, erupting into a fit of maniacal giggles interspersed with sneezing.

Macro gave another glance around the room, and his heart froze in his chest. Something hung beside the stove, something he'd missed. Hanging by its tail was a spoink, missing the pearl on its head.

"Oh that?" Surge followed his eyes. "We had pearl soup for dinner last night. We'll be having spoink curry tonight. Care to join us?"

Macro felt unbelievably sick. He backed towards the door, but before he reached it another pan clattered against it just above his head. Then it knocked on the door and poofed away in a cloud of smoke.

He turned back to Surge and flashed his canines, but she didn't acknowledge it, too interested in her book. "Why in the world are you eating a spoink?!"

"The Queen permits it," she said flatly. "'Livestock', she calls it."

"It's cannibalism!"

"Take it up with the Queen," said Surge. "I'm nought but a Duchess."

"I think I shall!" He turned to the door and paused with his paw over the handle. "Where can I find this Queen?"

"Heart Palace."

That wasn't a name he was familiar with, but it wasn't a world he was familiar with. He licked his lips and spoke without looking back, "Have you seen DL?"

The already loud laughter increased in volume and mania. Surge leapt to her feet and grabbed the chingling by his tassels, lobbing him towards the kitchen. He clutched onto the spoink's head, dragging the pig pokemon from its nail. Its eyes flashed with life, and it landed on its springy tail and bounced towards the door with the chingling still clutching onto its head. Macro wrenched it open, watching as it bounded away towards the forest which had oddly replaced the mushroom field.

He didn't wait around for Surge's answer. Instead, he ducked a meat cleaver and fled from the house, slamming the door behind him. The meat cleaver embedded itself in the trunk of a tree with a 'twang!' as it wiggled with the impact.

"What a crazy-ass place!" he gasped.

"Certainly."

He jerked his head back to look into a tree. Sprawled on the branch was a pachirisu, leaning her head on one paw.

"But here, you might be perceived as the crazy one," she said.

"DL?" he gasped.

She watched the spoink hop away into the trees and sighed. "Such an annoying chingling, but he makes a rather handsome spoink pearl."

"What are you doing here?" Macro gasped. "I mean… what are we doing here? And you didn't drown! Thank goodness."

She peered down at him and yawned. "Why would I have drowned?"

"I saw you in the lake."

"The Lake of Tears?" She shrugged and a huge grin split her face. "Pachirisu can swim, you know."

He stared at her dumbfounded, then shook his head sharply. "Where are we? Do you know?"

"We're here." She spread an arm across the forest. "That's all you need to know."

"Rather lax on the details, DL," he muttered. Then he spoke more loudly, "This is a ridiculous place. How do I get back to my own world?"

"I think this is a splendid place," she said. "But if you want to get back, I guess you have to take things up with the Queen. She rules this world, not me. I'm just a humble pachirisu."

"And how do I get there?"

She pointed to her right. "That way." Macro was about to head in that direction then froze as she pointed to her left. "Or was it that way?"

He frowned up at her. "Come on, DL. I've no time for jokes."

She grinned from ear to ear and drifted into the air. Then she leant on her back, flicking her long tail up below her legs.

"We've all the time in the world," she said. "Enjoy a little madness."

"Madness? This world is totally crazy! Everyone I meet seems mad!"

"Oh, we can't help it. We're all mad here." She pointed to herself, then to Macro. "I'm mad, you're mad-"

"I'm not mad!" he paused then looked up at the canopy. "… Am I? I mean… I've clearly dreamt this place up…"

"Exactly."

"But I don't want to be mad!" he shrieked. "I want reality! I've got a girl to save, and a crazed robot to stop!"

She turned and drifted towards the ground until she was hovering upside-down before him. "So it's all about the romance is it?"

His entire face flushed and he stuttered. "N-no! It's not."

Another grin. "Lies."

If this was DL, she was clearly at the mercy of this crazy world. Maybe they were all imposters? Whatever it was, he had to fix it.

He pushed her aside and marched through the trees. "Forget it. I'll find Heart Palace myself, and get myself back to reality."

"If you keep going that way," she said, freezing him in his tracks, "you'll find the Mad Hatter."

He glanced back at her, then turned to head the other way.

"And that way leads to the March Hare," she said.

"Doesn't sound so bad." He kept marching on. "Rather him than some Mad Hatter."

"You say that now," she said. "But have you ever seen a hare in March?"

He inclined his head on one side and she chuckled.

"Of course, this is May so perhaps she won't be quite so mad," she explained, "but I guess you can take your chances."

A golden ring appeared behind DL and she vanished into it. Macro's jaw dropped as he watched it close up after her. Then it reopened again higher up in the canopy.

"Oh, by the way." She poked her head out of it. "Are you to play croquet with the Queen today?"

"I beg your pardon?" he asked.

"Croquet," she repeated. "She's been sending out invitations."

"Well I'm afraid I haven't got one," he said.

DL shrugged then grinned. "Well if you do show up, I'll be there." Then she vanished back into the ring.

Macro shook himself off and looked left and then right. "Both mad, eh? Well, I guess I'll take my chances with the March Hare."

…

The woodland thinned out into a clearing, where sat a house with long buneary ears. The roof was thatched with fur, and it towered above Macro's head. He ducked by a tree root and placed his paw upon it.

"I can't enter there," he squeaked. "What if she eats me? I don't know if mawile is on the menu in this crazy place!"

Then he remembered the onions. He plucked one from his bag, the red one, and stared at it. It seemed a lot bigger than one would have looked had his paws been their ordinary size.

"If I remember rightly," he said, "it was a white one that made me shrink. So maybe a red one will make me grow?"

So he took a nibble, and before he knew it, he shot right up in size. The trees looked ordinary, the house looked ordinary. But the sudden change felt very surreal. He popped the onion back into his pouch and tiptoed towards the house.

Voices reached his ears. Laughter, singing, and the clatter of crockery. Thankfully no one was throwing it around. A cute, white picket fence surrounded a long garden, and in the middle of the garden sat a long table. Only three pokemon sat around the table. A delphox, a lopunny and an eevee. The eevee lay sprawled with his head on his paws, snoring loudly, but the other two didn't appear to notice.

"Digit?" he gasped, eyeing the lopunny.

But she didn't look up at him. Too engrossed in whatever the delphox had to say. Given his run-in with Worm, Surge and Cookie, he wasn't sure whether or not to be reassured at a familiar face.

Nevertheless, Macro vaulted the low fence and strolled towards the table. The delphox looked up from his cup of tea and upon seeing Macro almost dropped it, sloshing steaming liquid onto the table. The lopunny let out a cry of distress and reached for a napkin, but the delphox didn't take his eyes off the mawile.

He flicked his top hat so it was resting between his large ears and shouted, "No room!"

The lopunny looked up at this and added, "No room!"

"What are you talking about?" Macro spread his arms wide. "There's plenty of room!"

"No there isn't," said the delphox, who Macro assumed with a sinking feeling must be the Mad Hatter. "You are imagining it."

"Definitely imagining it," murmured the eevee. "You are but dreaming. Twinkle… twinkle…"

Macro pulled up a seat anyway and helped himself to a teacup. The March Hare slapped his paws aside and frowned at him.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

Familiar face or not, it wasn't the Digit he knew.

He looked up at her and shrugged. "I'm beginning to wonder if anyone I think I know here is either off their rocker, or an impostor."

She scrutinised him for a moment then nodded. "Good answer."

The table fell into a long, painful silence as the two pokemon continued to stare at him. The only sound came from the snoring eevee who Macro realised had fallen asleep on a plate of scones, and his entire chin and chest were coated with jam and cream.

Finally, the Hatter broke the silence. "Your scarf needs washing."

Macro looked up with a start then glanced down at his scarf. He fixed the delphox with a frown. "No it doesn't."

"It smells."

Macro flashed a canine. "It's rather rude to make personal remarks, you know."

"Of course!" said March. "You should know."

"You're also rather short," said the Hatter. "You should eat more onions."

Macro seethed silently and picked up his teacup. But there was nothing in it. Instead, all the tea had drained out of a hole in the bottom.

"Answer me something," said the delphox. "Why is a murkrow like a writing desk?"

From one extreme to the next. Macro mulled this over for a moment, then wondered why on earth he was bothering.

"What kind of nonsense is that?" he asked.

"It's a riddle," said the Hatter. "I am testing your intelligence."

Oh, so it was an insult. A bit of a back-handed one at that. Macro snorted and discarded the teacup to the seat beside him.

"I haven't a clue," he said. "Go on, tell me."

"Can't." The Hatter shrugged. "I don't know the answer myself."

"The answer is simple." The eevee lifted his head and rubbed a buttery paw over his eyes, smearing the fur back from his chipboard tattoo. "It's because they can both make a few notes, albeit flat, and you can't place either with the wrong end in front."

March pointed a claw at the eevee and beamed. "Genius!"

"That makes no sense!" Macro roared.

"It makes a lot of sense!" the Hatter roared back. "Now shut up and drink your tea."

A cup scurried across the table to Macro and poured tea from a pink teapot into itself. It seemed to go about it for a good long while. Long enough for the Hatter to check the time on his pocket watch.

"Do you know what's going on in this place?" Macro asked.

"What's going on is that Time has stopped working," said the Hatter. "At least for us, anyway."

Macro decided to brush past that little statement. "I mean where am I? What happened to System? My home?" He paused and continued watching the teapot pour out its endless stream of tea into the tiny teacup. "I mean, it took me ages to find DL and then I lost her again."

"I like to do that too!" March leant forward across the table all too eagerly. "I check the alphabet every day just to make sure none of those pesky letters go missing!"

Macro stared back at her, unsure of what to say. The lopunny retracted to her seat, looking all too pleased with herself.

"What day of the month is it?" the Hatter asked.

"Dunno," said Macro. "But last I checked, it was the fourth."

"Just as I thought." The Hatter lifted the watch to his ear and sighed. "Two day's slow. I guess butter just didn't fix it."

"It was the best butter," said March sadly. "The kind we used to oil the eevee. And he's working just fine!"

"No he's not, he's sleeping again." The Hatter leant across the table and poured scalding hot tea onto the eevee's nose. "Come on, wake up!"

The eevee sat up spluttering and wiped a paw over his muzzle. "Oh dear! Did I nod off again?"

The Hatter said nothing as he checked over his watch. "Typical. Still six o clock, still tea time."

"Still March," said March. "I guess Time really has stopped."

Macro waved a paw at the Hatter. "Just get a new watch!"

March glanced at Macro and wiggled in her seat. Her eye twitched. "I really wanna box your ears."

"Well, I've had enough." Macro shoved his cup towards the middle of the table, startling a teapot, and stood up. "I need to find the Queen."

"Good luck," said the Hatter. "We were playing hide and seek with her last…" He checked his watch and shook it. "Oh bother. I don't remember. But we never found her."

"Nope!" said March. "I spent three days stuck in a tree. Had to eat onions to stay alive."

"Hmm, no wonder you're so tall," Macro joked.

March grinned broadly and sipped at her tea.

"Anyway, I'll be off then," said Macro.

Hatter said nothing, still shaking and checking his watch. March returned to her tea, staring off into space. The eevee had nodded off again on his 'bed of scones', snoring into a plate of melted butter.

Macro shook his head and vaulted over the fence, glad to leave the mad tea party behind. Still non the wiser as to how to get to Heart Palace.

…

The woodland spread out around Macro, its trees standing tall like sentinel soldiers. Signs were nailed to the trees, promising to guide him in the right direction. But closer inspections made his stomach sink.

'This way.'

'No, this way.'

'You sure you want to go that way?'

'Don't listen to him, it's this way!'

And so on, and so forth.

He shrugged off the signs and resigned himself to finding his own way, with no idea to how far he'd come, or whether or not he was moving in circles. Thanks to the promise of yet another arrow sign, he was strongly beginning to think so. He could still hear the mad tea party well in the distance, and it greatly unsettled him.

"I can't seem to put them far enough behind me," he muttered. "There's got to be some way out of these woods. That flippin' Digit. Threatenin' to box my ears." A canine poked out of his lip and he cast a glance over his shoulder. "It's like she knows I won't fight back. But I won't go down eas-"

Thud!

Solid wood met face. He staggered backwards, rubbing the side of his jaw.

"What the-?!" He glared up at a wide, ancient tree. "Where'd that come from?!"

The hollow trunk sported a mawile-sized door. And right above it, a wide arrow sign pointing down at it. 'Trust me, it's this way.'

"Really?" he asked the door. "You want me to open you? And what shiny, terrifying delights do you hold, hmm?"

The door didn't answer.

Macro sighed and grabbed the handle. To his surprise, it opened freely, swinging away from him. Beyond it was a glorious garden that almost took his breath away. Vibrant flowers and grass so green he wondered if it were an illusion. Until he stepped on it, feeling its soft blades stroking his paw pads. The door slammed and he twisted on the spot towards it. But it had vanished. No tree. No door. No sign.

A trap?

He deeply hoped not.

Oh well. Now he had several directions to choose from. He turned back towards the colourful flowers. Most of them were red, and shaped like hearts. Even the neatly manicured topiaries.

He shrugged and began heading towards them. "Guess I'll go this way."

"You sure you wanna head that way?"

The familiar voice snapped his head up to the air above him. Slowly, bit by bit, a pachirisu began to manifest. First her tail, then her feet. Then her ears. Until gradually, her body met in the middle. She floated on her back, arms tucked behind her head.

"It's a dreadful place," she said.

Macro glanced at the bushes and flowers. The lush green grass. Almost baiting him to keep moving forwards.

"What exactly is it?" he asked.

"Heart Palace."

"Then that's exactly where I want to go!" He waved her off and pressed on.

She drifted along above him, backwards, her tail acting as a rudder. One eye fixed on him and she grinned widely.

"Have you met the Queen?" she asked.

"No," he said. "But she can't be as mad as that tea party I've just come from."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," said DL. "Compared to the Queen, those two are a real treat. A fine Earl Grey."

Macro faltered and glanced back over his shoulder. Behind him was just green. Dotted here and there by a spray of red flowers. Beyond that was a flat stretch of hedges.

"What's back that way then?" he asked.

"A maze."

"A maze?"

"Yep." Another grin. "It's a-maze-ing."

Puns? Not once did Macro recall DL using puns. He waved her off and kept heading towards Heart Palace.

"If I see the Queen," he said, "she might be able to get me back to my own, sane reality."

"And what makes your reality so sane?"

"Well everyone makes sense for one thing! And Digit doesn't threaten to box my ears. Worm can't evolve, and Cookie is about as violent as a day old hatchling on tranquilisers!"

"I don't know any of those pokemon," said DL.

He pointed a claw at her. "And you can't float! Nor… disappear and reappear at will."

"Really?" she raised an eyebrow. "You sure about that?"

With that, she grinned once more, and slowly faded away. First the white parts of her body. Then the blue. The last parts to fade were her grin, yellow cheeks and chocolate eyes. They hung around for a few seconds after the rest of her had vanished, leaving Macro feeling greatly unsettled. Once they'd gone, he smoothed out his fur and let out a flustered breath.

"To Heart Palace it is, then," he said to no one.

He reached the topiaries, and between them sat an archway. Ivy trailed up it, red blossoms buzzing with life. On closer inspection, he saw a flying mudbray no bigger than his index claw. It rocked back and forth on wooden supports, then whinnied as it flew to another blossom. Shooing a tiny butterfree aside. Which had bread for wings. Buttered bread.

"What kinda crazy-ass place is this?" he muttered.

He strolled through the arch and weaved his way along the path between the heart-shaped topiaries. It seemed to stretch on forever, until voices reached his ears. Familiar voices. He followed them into a large courtyard.

Anchor stood beside a quagsire, both of them waving around paintbrushes laden with red paint. Small trees stood in neat rows on either side of the square, their red roses dripping red paint onto the grass. Macro turned back to the frantically painting pokemon. Above them flew Matrix, wielding a paintbrush much too large for him with very little effort (or enthusiasm).

All three pokemon sported unusual garments. A long, flat shirt that came down to their knees. Both their shirts and trousers were white, as were their helmets. Each shirt was designed to resemble a playing card in the Hearts suit. Anchor was seven, the quagsire was two, and Matrix was three.

Macro strolled towards them and eyed the dripping bush. White roses dotted it, each one fated to receive a thick coating of red paint.

"What exactly are you doing?" Macro asked them.

"Painting the roses red," Anchor growled all too rapidly.

Macro cleared his throat and asked, politely, "May I ask why?"

"Well, you see." Anchor lowered his paintbrush to face Macro. "We were asked to plant red rose bushes. But Three, here," he pointed

the brush at Matrix, "went and planted white ones."

Matrix paused what he was doing to grin at Macro.

"So if we don't paint them red," Anchor said as he returned to his work, "the Queen will have our heads."

"Does she have something against white roses?" Macro asked.

"You could say that," said Anchor. "She's the Queen of Hearts. Hearts are red. So all her flowers have to be red."

"It's only logical," said Matrix. "Why would the Queen of Hearts want white flowers?"

"Then why did you plant white flowers?!" Anchor snapped.

"I got bored," said Matrix. "I wanted to see her reaction."

"Her reaction is to remove our heads from our bodies!" Anchor sighed and ran a paw over his face, leaving a small smear of red paint on his forehead. "Why can't you just be sensible like Two?"

The quagsire said nothing, silently painting the roses with all the neatness of an artist.

"If it were just Three's fault," said Macro, "why are you two worried for your own heads?"

"Well all three of us planted the bushes," Anchor explained. "So, whether or not we knew what we were plantin', we're all responsible. So we gotta cover up our crimes."

"Crimes?!"

"Yeh. Plantin' the enemy's colour."

"This Queen sounds mighty violent," said Macro, more to himself. "Kinda wish I'd picked the other route."

"Well you're here now," said Anchor. "So start paintin'."

Macro found a large paintbrush shoved into his paws. With a shrug, he dipped it into the paint tin and started painting what was left of the white roses.

A trumpet blast erupted through the square, and the three soldiers dropped their paintbrushes onto the grass.

"Oh jack, it's the Queen!" Anchor barked. "Quick, get down!"

The three suits threw themselves face first onto the floor. Macro looked from them to the oncoming parade and back.

"Get down!" Anchor barked at him.

Macro sighed and slumped onto his belly, pressing his face into the grass. It seemed like an odd thing to do. Why not just kneel, or bow as she passed? Why lie flat like a playing card?

Heavy footsteps marched across the square towards them. Then stopped. A familiar voice shouted, "Here! The Queen of Hearts!"

Macro cracked an eye open to look up at the speaker, but the first thing he saw was a gothitelle standing before them. She clutched an ornamental staff in one paw, topped by a ruby encrusted heart. She gazed around at the rose bushes, each rose as red as the bows that adorned her body. Previously white bows replaced with red ones. Behind her, kitted out like a Queen's Prime Minister, was DL. Macro opened his mouth to gasp out her name, but swallowed it back.

Socket paced around the rose bushes, a smile on her face.

"Ahh, my precious rose bushes," she said. "The blooms have really come into their own, haven't they?"

She paused beside one to sniff it, holding the blossom delicately. A grimace twisted her smile and she released it, staring at her paw in horror.

"Paint?" she gasped. Then she turned to her entourage. "Paint?!"

The army stood to attention, keeping their eyes trained ahead of them.

"Who's been painting my roses red?!" she roared.

DL pointed a trembling paw at the suits lying face down. Socket marched over to them, eyeing each one in turn.

"Who are you?!" Socket asked. "Stand at once!"

The three suits scrambled to their feet, smoothing out their suits. Socket's scowling face leant towards Anchor's.

"Why are you painting my roses red?" As calm as her voice sounded, it was laced with danger.

Anchor stuttered and twisted the hem of his shirt in his paws. "You see… your majesty… there was an accident and-"

"And what?" she asked.

"Well… you see… we accidentally planted white roses…"

"White roses?" Socket pulled her head back and narrowed her eyes.

"Yes, your majesty." Anchor glanced away from her. "I'm terribly sorry. We've been trying to fix it-"

"In the hopes I wouldn't notice?" Socket tapped her staff on her arm. "I suppose you thought that was noble?"

Anchor and the quagsire stuttered while Matrix twirled his antenna in his paw.

The Queen straightened up and opened her mouth so wide Macro feared she was going to swallow them whole. "Off with their heads!"

The army surged forwards and grabbed the three suits, then marched them from the square towards the palace.

Socket watched them go then turned to Macro. "And who are you? You don't work for me. You aren't in suit."

"I'm just a humble, lost mawile," said Macro.

Socket leered at him, tapping her arm with her staff. "I'm just a humble, lost mawile what?"

"Eh?" Macro cocked an eyebrow and his muzzle creased with confusion.

"I said," Socket said, her voice laced with ice, "'I'm a humble, lost mawile what?'"

Macro shook his head and shrugged. "Nope. I can't work out this riddle, I'm afraid. It could rival the Hatter's riddle about the writing desk."

"You are meant to address me as 'your majesty'!" she snapped. "Now try again!"

A vile taste filled Macro's mouth at the mere sound of those words. Surely having to say them would poison him? He took a step back, fixing the gothitelle with a look of sheer horror.

"Just do it," DL said meekly from behind her. She lifted a paw and sliced it across her throat, making a clear point to Macro what would happen should he fail to address the Queen with her favoured title.

"I'm just a humble, lost mawile," he said through gritted teeth, "your majesty."

Socket smiled and nodded once. "Much better. Now… do you play croquet?"

"Croquet?" Macro's eyes widened as he recalled DL mentioning such a game to him. "But I never received an invite."

"I am offering you one," said the Queen. "And it is non-optional. You shall join me in a game of croquet, or it will be your head."

If he declined, she'd probably use his head as the ball. With a nod, he resigned himself to his fate.

"Excellent!" Socket turned to follow after her entourage. "We will start post-haste."

Macro exchanged glances with DL, and she lowered her head to scurry after the Queen. With a sigh, he followed behind her.

…

The Queen's Court was bustling with various colourful guests. Amongst them scurried her suits, throwing themselves around the court and bending with all four paws on the ground, arching their backs reminiscent of croquet hoops. Macro barely got a word out before a small doduo was stuffed into his paws. He stared down at it, then looked up at Socket.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Your croquet mallet," she answered.

His brow furrowed and he opened his mouth to retort, but DL stuffed her paw into it, turning his comment into a surprised muffle.

"And this," Socket stooped to place a togedemaru at his feet, "is your ball. Commence!"

The gothitelle turned and marched away, clutching her own doduo in one paw. She shouted commands to the other players before vanishing into the thick of it all.

Macro turned to DL and gestured to the doduo hanging obediently from his paw by its legs. "What on earth is this?"

"Croquet," she said meekly.

"With live pokemon? It's barbaric!"

DL waved her paws and let out a long, sharp 'shh!' She glanced over to where the Queen had vanished then moved closer to him and lowered her voice.

"The Queen has standards," she said. "Those that don't fit them have their rights removed. Turned into meat or… entertainment." She nodded to the togedemaru who was peering up at Macro over her shoulder.

The small hedgehog pokemon raised her arms. "We doin' this or not? 'Cos I haven't got all day."

"Oh… of… of course." Macro readied his doduo behind the small togedemaru and she curled up into a tight ball.

"Ready!" the doduo barked. "Aim! F-"

"No!" Macro dropped the doduo, receiving surprised looks from both heads and the togedemaru.

"What's he doing?" one head asked the other.

"Not a clue," it replied. "But at this rate, the Queen will-"

"Sever his head for sure!" The first head trembled.

"Took the words right out of my mouth," said the second.

"I'm not doing this," Macro hissed. "You have rights."

"Hey, I'm just glad I'm not on a sandwich," said the togedemaru. "Now use that doduo and smack me towards that croquet hoop

before it moves again! I wanna be on a winning team for once."

Macro shook his head and turned away. "No. I will not do something so barbaric."

"Why you…" The togedemaru waved a tiny fist. "Bleeding heart!"

Macro looked back to find DL, hoping to drag her away from the barbaric game. But she'd seemingly vanished. He let out a sigh and continued on towards the heart-shaped topiaries.

"Curious fellow, aren't you?"

DL's voice snapped his head up towards a broad tree branch. He wasn't surprised to find every single blossom was red and heart shaped.

"DL?" he squeaked. "How did you get up in that tree?"

"I'm a squirrel." Her answer became redundant as she slowly drifted into the air. "Now. You seem rather perplexed by the Queen's wonderful game."

"Wonderful?" he scoffed.

DL merely grinned. "Why don't I introduce you to someone who can put things into a better perspective?"

He snorted and folded his arms, glancing back at the game. The Queen shouted something in the distance that sounded very much like 'Cheater! Off with his head!'

"If it gets me out of here," he said, turning back to DL, "then sure. Introduce me."

She let out a silent laugh and tucked her paws behind her head, drifting backwards away from him. "Very well. Follow me."

Macro ducked through the bushes, the sounds of the game fading away behind him. Pretty soon, he lost track of the pachirisu.

"DL?" he shouted. But he got no reply.

With a sigh, he pressed on. The path weaved through the topiaries like a maze, and he soon found himself running into dead ends. He muttered under his breath and turned one eighty to retrace his footsteps. The path turned sharply to the right, and he let out a squeak as he found himself face to grinning face with the floating pachirisu.

"Good grief!" He placed a paw against his pulsing rib cage then flashed a canine at her. "What game are you playing?"

"Just hide and seek," she said. "I'd say 'you're next', but we're here."

She drifted backwards through a neatly manicured gorse bush (with red, heart-shaped berries) and Macro ducked after her. The thorns snagged his fur as he scrambled through them, shielding his eyes which they seemed intent on scratching out. Once on the other side, he gazed out at a heart-shaped pond which was, surprisingly, not red. Beside the pond sat a snoring talonflame, his head lolling forward against his chest.

"This is the Queen's mysterious creature," DL explained. "He can tell you everything."

With that, she did a little back-flip in the air and vanished through a golden hoop. Macro looked from the spot she'd occupied back to the talonflame.

"Switch?" he asked, tentatively.

The talonflame jerked his head up, letting out a loud, surprised snort. He blinked his bleary eyes and fixed them on the mawile.

"You need to keep your voice down when others are sleeping," said Switch. "Otherwise, you're just being rude."

"Sorry." Macro shrugged and shifted his weight to one leg. "But DL said you might be able to help me."

"I don't know who this DL is," said Switch. "But he's no friend of mine."

"She," Macro corrected.

Switch appeared to not notice. He craned his neck around and started preening his right wing, snubbing Macro completely. The mawile cleared his throat, and Switch looked at him out of the corner of his eye, not stopping his preening.

"She brought me here," Macro began, "because she thought you might be able to explain the Queen's barbaric game of croquet."

Switch dropped his wing, letting it fold neatly against his side, and turned fully to Macro.

"Barbaric?" he repeated. "I'd be inclined to agree with you. A lot of pokemon here have little to no rights. Those that fall into that category are either abused or turned into meat. One such pokemon has met the latter fate many times."

"Eh?" Macro raised a confused brow.

"Well… not personally," said Switch. "His family, mainly. One by one. Gone. Would you like him to tell you about his sorrow?"

Macro's eye wandered to the pond. A fish pokemon? That would have been his first guess. But seeing the spoink, and the croquet game, he decided he couldn't very well just assume.

"All right," he said, perching on a rock beside the talonflame. "Go ahead."

Switch cleared his throat and turned his head to the water. "Oi! Mock Squirtle!"

Squirtle? Ripples spread across the water, drawing closer towards them. The first thing he saw was a long, blue fin, slicing through the glassy surface like a blade. Then two blue paws clutched the bed, followed by a lithe, blue body. Drops of water fell from their fur. No. Not a squirtle at all.

A vaporeon sat down… rather floppily. Macro recognised him immediately.

"Floppy?" he gasped.

The vaporeon blinked his glassy, black eyes. The last time he'd seen them, they'd been filled with mischief despite his injuries. Now… they were filled with sorrow.

Floppy let out a wistful sigh and flopped onto the rocks, letting his chin fall onto his forepaws.

Switch inclined his head on one side then nodded to Macro. "I thought you might want to tell this young fellow about your sorrow."

"Sorrow?" Floppy sighed again. "What's the point. No one cares."

"Hey!" Macro narrowed his eyes. "I care! Everything that's goin' on in this place? It's madness!"

"Precisely," said Switch. "Everyone is mad here. Because she's mad."

"The Queen?" Macro asked.

"The Queen," Switch and Floppy answered.

Floppy raised his head and blinked his huge, sad eyes. "Ever since she became the Queen, the world turned violent. Heads rolling,

pokemon turned into slavery and meat. All because they don't fit her criteria."

"And what would that be?" Macro asked.

Floppy shrugged. "She doesn't have one, really. If she doesn't like you, or you wrong her in some way, she'll have your head. If you're a bird, or a water type, or fall into her 'livestock' category, you're meat."

"And what of the togedemaru?" Macro asked.

Floppy shrugged again. "Oh that's obvious. She needed pokemon that roll."

"Exactly," said Switch. "And all the voltorb she tried to use exploded. Made a jolly mess of the palace grounds."

"This is insane!" Macro roared.

"Of course it is," said Floppy. "Because she is!"

Heavy panting came from the bushes and DL exploded through them. She stood, trying to catch her breath, then looked up at him.

"There you are," she said. "Come on! The trial's about to start!"

"What trial?" Macro asked.

"What do you mean 'what trial'?" DL gasped. "Yours!"

Macro's jaw almost hit the floor. "What on earth did I do?"

"No time to explain." DL grabbed his paw and dragged him after her through the maze. "We have to go now!"

His heart hammered in his chest with every foot step. The maze zipped past him all too quickly, and before he knew it he was dragged through the palace doors to the Queen's court room.

Socket sat in her throne, high up where everyone could see her. A plump sparksurfer raichu stood behind a podium, leafing through sheets of paper each of which had the Queen's heart motif printed on them. Macro was thrown into a seat before the jury. Various small pokemon filled the jury booth, each one clutching a small black slate.

"A call to silence!" Socket roared.

It hadn't been all that necessary. The pokemon in the courtroom hadn't so much as squeaked.

She fixed her livid eyes on his. "Hunter. You are being tried for stealing something that belongs to me."

Macro's entire voice turned dry. He stuttered, but she went on, silencing him.

"You have stolen my tarts," she said. "And for that, I find you guilty."

"We can't rush just yet," said the raichu. "We haven't brought in any witnesses."

Socket sat back in her seat and sighed, rubbing between her eyes. "Fine. Bring in the first witness."

"Calling the first witness!" the raichu roared.

The double doors were thrown open as a tatty looking archeops scurried through them. She looked up at the Queen and grinned.

"Yo there, your Majesty!" She flopped into the witness booth. "How can I help you?"

"Do not address me with such vulgarities!" Socket snapped. "If I didn't need your evidence, I'd take your head!"

Annie shrugged and kicked one gangly leg over the other.

"Now then," said the raichu, turning to his papers. "You say you saw Hunter take the tarts?"

"I never said such a thing." Annie faltered and placed a claw under her chin, glancing up at the ceiling. "Or did I? I don't remember. What day was it?"

"It was a Friday," said the raichu.

"Hmm…" She inclined her head on one side. "I don't remember Friday."

"That's very important!" the raichu shouted to the jury.

The small pokemon scrambled to write this all down on their slates with their claws.

"Next witness!" the Queen roared.

Suits rushed to the witness booth and picked it up, carrying Annie out of the courtroom. She let out a cheer and raised her wings into the air as she was whisked through the side doors into the yard. The entire booth went flying and the suits slammed the doors before rushing to erect a new one. Right before the Mad Hatter strolled in with March and the eevee.

"Hater," the raichu said slowly.

"It's Hatter," the delphox corrected.

"Apologies," said the raichu. "You claim to have dined with Hunter recently? What was his behaviour like?"

"Rude," said March. "He just invited himself in."

"Despite us telling him there's no room," said the Hatter. "All unclean with his mucky scarf. Not quite the gentlemon at all."

"Not at all," added the eevee.

"So… technically…" said the raichu slowly, "he stole from you?"

"You could say that," said March. "Helped himself to tea and scones."

"I never touched a scone!" Macro barked.

"You did," said the Mad Hatter. "And you got fur in them."

"That might have been me, actually," said the eevee.

"Write that down!" the raichu barked at the jury.

Macro pointed at the eevee then looked directly at the Hatter. The delphox shrugged, before the suits were ordered once again to 'remove the witnesses'.

"Third witness!" the Queen roared.

The doors flew open and in marched a figure that left Macro chilled to the core. A mawile… complete with a scar and black scarf. Goggles topped his head, and he frowned at Macro as he took the witness booth.

"Now… tell me in all honesty," the raichu said to the mawile, "did Hunter steal the Queen's tarts?"

The mawile said nothing, almost staring into Macro's very soul. Macro staggered backwards, toppling over the jury booth onto the small pokemon. Yelps of protest came from beneath him as they tried desperately to scramble free.

"Yes," the mawile said flatly.

"No!" Macro roared. "I didn't steal anything! I rescued them!"

No sooner had the words left his mouth, the Queen roared "Off with his head!"

The suits lurched forwards, almost flying at him. A bone chilling scream left Macro's throat.

"Admit it, Macro," he heard the other him say. "You know you stole them. Whether or not you're trying to be the hero now, it doesn't change the fact you're a criminal. And you know it." The other mawile grinned widely, morphing slowly into a grinning pachirisu. "You deserve this."

Macro watched, stuttering, through the flying suits, as she rose into the air. Morphing, twisting, into the form of a grinning hoopa.

"Let's hear it again!" squealed BackDoor. "Off with his head!"

The suits rushed at Macro with more speed, their bodies morphing like origami. Their forms became more pointed, more knife-like, and Macro realised with horror they were morphing into kartana. A strangled scream erupted from him as their bladed limbs slashed at his body. That soreness in his chest flared up into a full-blown stabbing pain as one of them ran right through him. Red filled his vision. Then a white light started in the centre like a pin prick. It exploded like a star, dazzling him with a blinding white rose. He shut his eyes tightly, clutching the bleeding wound in his chest. He staggered back beneath their wicked blades and rolled backwards onto the floor as he groped for his missing lasers with his free paw.

Soft ground enveloped him like a mattress. The soreness lessened in his chest as he felt the last of the kartana vanish from him like dust. He blinked his eyes back open. Soft, white light surrounded him, and he found himself looking into Solgaleo's smiling face.

"Time to wake up," said the lion.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 55

A/N - Thanks for all faves, reviews and follows! =D

Chapter Fifty Four

Everything seemed to go in slow motion.

Defrag clutched the ladder rung below DL, firing Macro's laser at the kartana below. Fortunately they couldn't fly very high. Once the pokemon were above the rooftops, they were out of the deadly Ultra Beasts' reach. But that didn't satisfy Defrag. She kept a watchful eye on them, keeping the laser aimed on their drifting, swooping bodies, while DL tried to steady herself and Macro on the ladder.

Despite Defrag's offer, the pachirisu had insisted on carrying him. Defrag had been surprised at the smaller pokemon's strength. But in a crisis, one can often amaze others with what they can do. They can even amaze themselves.

The ladder came to a stop and DL scrambled through the hatch, stumbling under the mawile's weight. Defrag steadied her, gripping the laser in her teeth to free her paw. But DL was swiftly whisked through the hatch by Anchor.

"What on earth happened down there?!" The granbull gathered the unconscious mawile into his arms, much to DL's protests. "Steady on, DL! Tell me what - Digit?"

He spotted the lopunny as she scrambled through the hatch. She looked up, meeting his eyes, watching as the look of surprise melted into a frown.

"I ain't got time for this," he muttered. "He needs help, quick. Matrix! Set co-ordinates for Cyan City. Hyperdrive!"

The ribombee's head poked out of the cockpit door before vanishing like a dart.

"Cookie!" Anchor demanded. "Follow me with your first aid kit!"

"Roger!" The quirky voice came from the kitchen.

A dumpy brown slurpuff waddled into the corridor. He did a quick double-take when he saw Defrag, then almost fainted when he spotted Macro. He stuttered a few times, but Anchor dismissed it with his free paw.

"Hold it together. We need you right now," he said.

Anchor stomped down the corridor, stopping at the final room. With Macro in one arm, he scanned the door and marched inside before it had fully opened. DL was hot on his tail, her eyes never leaving Macro.

Defrag leant on the door and briefly glanced around the sparsely decorated room before looking back at the space pirates.

"Well he's a bloody mess." Anchor fumbled with the mawile's mask. "At least he's breathing. What happened down there?"

"It was the kartana." DL shook from ear to tail. She clasped her paws to her chest and sank down into a little chair beside the bed. "They chased us. One of them ran him down before we could get onto the ship."

When Anchor finally removed the mask, his face paled. Macro's muzzle was crimson. Defrag's paws went to her mouth and she backed out of the room. DL let out a whimper and turned away in her seat, covering her eyes.

"I'd say they did more than run him down," said Anchor weakly.

Cookie placed the first aid kit at the foot of the bed and pulled out a full ream of bandages. He nudged Anchor aside and commenced

removing Macro's scarf before trying to stem the bleeding. From what Defrag had witnessed back in Spool City, it would be no easy feat.

"I daren't check over the wound," he said. "I don't want to disturb him too much. But…"

The sheets were already soaked with blood. Hopefully it just looked a lot worse than it was.

"I'm not sure how much help I can be," the slurpuff went on. "I'd say he needs a surgeon, not a chef who passed a course in first aid with health and safety."

He knotted the bandage as tightly as he could then took a step back, wiping his bloodied paws on his berry-stained apron.

Anchor stared down at Macro for a while then placed a paw on Cookie's back. "You've done what you can. Let's just hope it's not too long until we reach Cyan City."

"How fast is your hyperdrive?" Defrag asked.

Anchor looked up at her again with surprise. He'd likely forgotten she was even there. He brushed back his mohawk and replaced his surprise with another frown, before marching from the room.

"Come on, DL," he said. "We'll leave Cookie with him. He knows what he's doin'. We'll only be in the way."

"No."

He looked back at the pachirisu. She'd turned her chair back, and clasped Macro's paw in both of hers. Her eyes were screwed shut, cheeks wet with tears, and she shook her head to further emphasise her answer.

"I'm not leaving him," she said. "I can't!"

The slurpuff looked up and gave Anchor a sad smile, still with his tongue poking out. "It's okay if she stays. She's not in my way."

Anchor nodded solemnly and let the door close behind him. He fired Defrag a leer then marched down the corridor. She faltered by Macro's room before resigning herself to following the silent granbull. Despite his blood stained paws, he pulled out his phone and held it to his ear.

"Hi, Jumper?" he said, then paused as he listened to the speaker on the other end. He twitched his claws and Defrag thought she heard him mutter under his breath. "No, sorry. Things aren't alright. I've got an emergency here. It's Macro. We're rushing him to Cyan City now." Another pause. "It doesn't look good, Governor."

Defrag felt her stomach knot and she faltered by the bathroom as Anchor ducked inside with his phone. He wasn't in there very long. When he came back out, his phone was tucked away and he wiped his wet paws on his chest. He gave her another suspicious scowl then waved her off.

With nowhere else to go, she ended up in the cockpit. Matrix looked up from his navigation desk, winding an antenna in his tiny paw. He raised an eyebrow at her, then returned to the detailed layout on the screen.

Anchor fell into a large seat and leant back, frowning out at the world zipping by.

She looked around at the cockpit and tucked her paws behind her back. "It doesn't look much different to the old ship."

Anchor said nothing, staring silently ahead.

"What happened to the huntail?" she asked.

"You should know what happened to it," he grunted.

She shifted her weight to one foot, not taking her eyes off him. "I leave and he gets a new ship? Or is it something to do with that raid in Botnet?"

"Isn't it funny," said Anchor, "how whenever you're around, something bad happens to him?"

She creased her nose and leered at the back of his head. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"The Analogue Isles, saving your hide, he almost died. That weapons raid you took in Botnet City, he almost died. Now he runs into you in Spool and look what's happened!"

"How is any of that my fault?! And you were there during that raid! I had nothing to do with it!" She frowned as he glanced over his shoulder. "I'm not the one who almost took his eye out! I'm not the one who set the building ablaze! And I'm not the one who ran him through with that monster, it did that itself!"

Anchor flashed his canines and turned back to the controls.

"Besides," she went on. "Are you seriously telling me nothing like this has happened since I left Wildcard?"

"Of course not." Anchor sighed and rubbed the bridge of his muzzle. "'Mon's as reckless as he's always been. Just… I'm a little scared, that's all. I've never seen him like this."

"To be honest, so am I." She shrugged and flopped into Macro's much smaller chair. "I've watched those creatures slice up walls and posters, run down random pokemon in the streets. But I never thought they might…" She trailed off and sighed into her paw.

"It ain't your fault, Digit," said Anchor apologetically. "Anyway, what's a nice lass like you doin' in Spool City?"

"I work there," she said. "For a detective named Tracer."

He snorted and rolled his eyes. "From one extreme to the next."

"Anyway. Enough about me. How long is it until we reach Cyan City?"

"It'll be another twenty five minutes," said Matrix.

Defrag started slightly. She'd almost forgotten the little bee was there. She turned back to Anchor and folded her paws in her lap.

"Do you think he'll make it?" she asked.

"Dunno." Anchor sighed and brushed back his mohawk. "I'm kinda clutching at straws."

"Then why Cyan City, exactly?" she asked. "Isn't Pulse City closer?"

"Kinda, but we ain't welcome there," said Anchor. "Besides, we've got friends in Cyan City. Plus, their medicine is much more effective."

"I guess." She paused and brushed a paw along her ear. "I'm a little surprised you're welcome there."

"Well, I'd tell you why but it's a long story."

"We've got over twenty minutes. We may as well kill some time. Take our mind off things."

"All right then." Anchor flashed her a grin. "I'll tell ya. Kinda lookin' forward to the surprise on your face."

…

Annie was feeling rather irritated. She'd managed to sleep through until the mid hours of the morning, and in her scramble for her magic pills had managed to secure her human form. All that time spent pruning her feathers and she was now as bald as a plucked ducklett.

She pulled her clothes on and stomped down the wooden stairs to the kitchen. Voices spoke in hushed tones and as she rounded the corner, Web turned her head and looked her up and down.

"Good to see you looking rested." The skuntank paused and cocked an eyebrow. "You've got your jacket on upside down, dear."

Annie stared down at herself, then removed her jacket to put it on the right way up.

"It's also inside out," said Trojan.

Web cuffed him over the head fin and tried to give Annie a reassuring smile. The human let out a sigh and flopped into a chair as she dragged the sleeves back out the right way.

"What are we doin' back in this dump?" she asked. "I thought we were in Pulse City."

Everyone fell silent and stared at her, mouths agape. She looked back up at them, clutching a sleeve in one hand. Her eyes wandered from each pokemon until they fell on two unfamiliar faces. A ruffled looking chatot and a strange, purple creature…

She lifted a finger and wagged it at the blobby alien thing. "The Time Onion… it's coming back to me now."

"She serious?" the chatot asked Web a little too loudly.

Web tried to hush him, but Annie sat back and kicked her boots up on the table. "Yes. It is coming back to me. We found my way home, right?"

"I'm afraid, dear," Web said slowly, "that Poipole isn't a time traveller. He's not the celebi you're looking for."

"What on earth's a poipole?" Annie scoffed.

Both Web and Trojan pointed a claw at the alien's head, while the chatot waved a wing at him.

"I already told you," said the alien. "I'm not a Time Onion."

Annie sighed and ran a hand over her face. The previous day was a blur.

"Anyway, I've got a question," said the chatot. "What exactly do you want with me? First thing I know is some crazy prehistoric bird is kidnapping me, now I'm sat on a table with another extinct species. You draggin' me into some kind of conspiracy or somethin'?"

Web looked up, meeting Annie's eye. "I'm afraid you're going to have to explain to Hatter what you want with him. Because you didn't tell us anything."

Annie scratched her head as she stared at the chatot blankly.

"Try to remember, dear," Web went on.

Annie shook her head and sighed, throwing her arms in the air. "I ain't a clue."

Her hand brushed something sticking out of her belt pouch and she looked down at a roll of paper sticking out of it. She grabbed it and unfurled it on the stained table top. The grimacing face of a mawile stared out at her, disfigured by an ugly scar. Below his face was a large number. A much more handsome figure. Fifty thousand credits.

Yes… it was starting to come back to her now.

She tapped the picture with a finger and looked up at Hatter. "I think I know what I wanted with you. You're a messenger, right?"

"I exchange information," he said. "I only have those posters because space pirates can now get in on arresting the most wanted 'mon in System. And his girlfriend, too."

"Girlfriend?" Annie squinted at the portrait. "Where?"

"Other side."

She flipped it over to be greeted by the pretty face of a zigzagoon. Same price.

"So let me get this straight." She frowned across at the parrot. "We arrest these guys, we get… what… a hundred thousand credits?"

"Exactly." Hatter grinned. "But you want my help, I want part of that deal."

Annie huffed and shoved the poster aside, replacing it with her steepled hands. "I don't exactly want you for no arrest mission. That's a little bit on the side to fuel my ship. I want you… to get the pokemon all riled up about eatin' water dwellers."

"Hang on." Hatter's grin fell away and the bridge of his beak creased in a frown. "What's this got to do with arrestin' some pirates?"

"Nothing. We can pay you. You just have to spread a little message. The mayor is crazy. She's having pokemon eat each other, and how far is it gonna go? Is it gonna stop at the fishes, or are they gonna start having marill on toast? Squirtle soup? Slowbro flambe?" She leant forwards and the corner of her mouth tugged up in a smirk. "Grilled chatot?"

He squawked and leapt back with a flap of his wings, but he quickly regained his composure and returned her smirk with a leer. "They wouldn't!"

Annie shrugged and leant back in her seat. "I reckon the fishes thought that too before restaurants upgraded their menu."

The chatot glanced from side to side, inclining his head slightly to get a good look in all directions. His movements were jerky, like the birds

she'd seen in videos. The kind of action that was often followed by a swift bolt towards the nearest exit.

"So are you on board?" she asked.

"How much you offerin'?" His voice was a near-growl.

Web fixed one eye on Annie. "I want to ask how you plan to pay him?"

Annie shrugged. "It's in my head that we can do it."

"How?"

"Dunno."

Web groaned and ran a paw down her face. She stood, her chair screeching over the floor. "I can't handle this. I need a walk."

She scooped up the poipole and whispered something to him that Annie couldn't pick out.

"I'm comin' with you." Trojan fixed Annie in a leer and rose to follow the skuntank.

The two halted in the doorway and stood aside as Waveform strolled in with Zip in tow. The decidueye looked from the two dark types then up at Annie and Hatter.

"You could cut the tension in here with a knife," he said. "Have you apologised?"

"What for?" Annie asked.

Waveform's eyes widened and he stood aside as Web excused herself and slipped out of the door. He glanced back at the two retreating pokemon then marched over to the table.

"What do you mean 'what for'?" he hissed. "Don't you remember our conversation?"

She looked up at the ceiling and stroked her chin with a finger nail. "Not all of it."

"What do you remember?"

"'A captain cares about their crew. The ship goes down, they go with it.'" She tucked her hands behind her head, not taking her eyes off Waveform's. A look of surprise crossed his features and he tucked his wings under his collar. "They have a choice, you know. They don't have to come with me. And neither do you."

"Have you told them that?" he asked.

"No. If they follow me back onto the ship, then I'll know where they stand." She stood up, sending her chair skittering over the floor. "Pay Perappu. He's gonna send out my message to the big cities of System Ground, and we're off to Wave City."

Zip's large eyes widened and he almost danced on his mechanical legs. "You mean we're still going?"

"Of course, little fish. I did make you a promise."

As she left the kitchen, she felt Waveform's eyes on her back.

"Annie?" his voice froze her in the doorway, and she looked back at him. "I really would tell them. They're not mind readers, and you still owe them an apology. I explained your actions in Pulse City were rash."

"But I don't remember my actions," she said.

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter. They do."

She sighed and nodded, then turned out of the front door. There was no sign of Web, but Trojan stood with his back against the wall. A

tatty cigarette hung out of his mouth, the sight of which took her by surprise. The same surprise reflected over his face and he quickly removed the foreign object from his mouth.

"Oh jack," he muttered. "Don't say anythin' to Web, alright? She thinks I quit."

Annie shrugged and hugged her arms over herself. "Where is she?"

"Went to get berries. Need to fill the ship, right?" He put the cigarette back and glanced down the vacant street. "It's awful quiet. Never used to be like this."

Annie was silent as she followed his gaze. All she could hear was the wind, and the occasional puff from the scrafty as he contributed to the toxic atmosphere.

"I'm under the impression I owe you an apology," she said. "For… my reckless actions."

He waved a paw at her. "Forget it. We can all get a little wild at times." He removed the cigarette again and folded his arms, letting it hang limply from his claws. "But I gotta suggest you don't do it again. I don't wanna get maimed by angry pirates, and Web don't like seein' pokemon mauled and swung about. But she's a mother duck. No sooner you apologise, she'll be makin' you nutpea soup and fresh bread."

"So you're both still with me?" she asked. "'Cos I don't know where Wave City is."

He laughed and flicked ash into the gutter. "Of course. Any excuse to get out of this dump. Besides, we need to get Poipole home, right?"

"I guess."

Annie hugged herself as the wind picked up around her. A crisp packet whipped up in the gutter and she followed its lonely trail

towards the shops. It was eerily quiet. It had always been quiet in Spool City, as far as she knew. But there were no pokemon on the street. No voices. No faces peeking out of windows.

She was about to open her mouth to suggest they leave that day, but a shrill squeal reached their ears. Trojan dropped his cigarette into a questionable puddle and turned to follow the noise. Another one sliced through the silence, louder and more clear. Panicked.

It was followed by Web's purple shape as she rounded a corner, chasing after Poipole's floating form. The strange creature fired something from his head. A stream of glistening sludge that propelled like a bullet towards the bend in the road. The creature ducked nimbly as something flew towards him, glistening in the dull light. White and yellow with four limbs stretched out to the side like a plane. It doubled back like a boomerang, aiming straight for Poipole.

Web shouted at him and dashed towards Annie and Trojan on all-fours, her tail held over her head like a cannon.

"Get inside!" she barked.

The creature zipped towards her and she ducked, firing a cloud of smoke from her tail. It engulfed the creature, sending it up in an arc to avoid it.

"What is that thing?" Trojan asked, stunned into a state of unnerving calm.

"I said get inside!" Web screamed.

She charged into him, bowling him through the door. Annie faltered behind them, looking back at the creature as it raced up the side of the wall, slicing stone and sending tiny shards raining down like hail. It pulled itself free effortlessly and launched towards her like a dart. She span aside and it skimmed her arm before crashing into the wall where it lodged like a knife. A flailing knife.

There was the sound like toothpaste being launched from a tube, and a torrent of slimy purple gunk struck the creature, plastering it to the wall. One of its bladed arms sliced through it, then flailed as it fought to wrestle itself free. Annie felt something soft strike her back and she ducked into the house. She found herself grabbed in one of Waveform's wings as he whisked her away from the entrance to slam the door shut right as Poipole flew over her head into Web's waiting arms.

"Again," said Trojan, more panicked. "What the jack is that thing?"

"I don't know," said Web. "But I suggest we don't wait around and find out."

"Get to the ship," said Annie. "It can't get us in there."

"It's a kartana," said Poipole. "They can slice through steel."

"A what?" Trojan asked.

"If you get the ship up high enough," Poipole went on, "it won't catch us. They can't fly very high. They use the wind current to glide."

"I'll take your word for it." Annie herded them towards the back door. "Off to Wave City it is. Let's head to the ship."

"It was slicing up Spool City," said Web over her shoulder. "Two of them."

"How many do you think there are?" asked Trojan.

"I dread to think…"

"They tend to hunt in small numbers," Poipole explained. "I wouldn't be surprised if there were five or six of them."

"Okay." Annie paused by the back door and pulled it open with a flourish. "Run to the ship."

Trojan was first out of the door. He bolted towards the pyukumyuku and wrenched the tin door open. At the wave of his paw, the rest of the pokemon scurried out towards it as Annie watched. Web closed up the rear, making sure Zip was ahead of her. She checked over her shoulder and clambered over the ramp into the ship.

Waveform placed a paw on Annie's back and led her out into the yard. He gave her a hefty shove and they raced for the ship. Annie threw herself on board and Waveform landed gracefully behind her, tugging the door shut.

"Not a single one in sight," he said.

Annie snorted. "I guess the one that attacked us must still be trying to pull itself free from our new friend's glue attack." She turned to the poipole sat in Web's lap. "I think I'm gonna call you Sticky."

Poipole blinked once. "But I'm Poipole."

"Not any more." Annie fell into her seat and crossed her legs at the ankle. "It's Sticky."

Poipole stuttered and shook his head. "Please don't…"

Annie waved her hand at the grimy window. "Let's get this thing in the sky, eh?"

"I'm already on it." Trojan pawed at a few buttons on the dash and the entire ship began to shake.

"Look…" Web pointed a claw at the house.

One of the kartana glided over the roof, then shot down like a dart out of sight. A second one rose up alongside it, shaking purple globules from its limbs.

"Hurry up, ship." Annie's voice came out oddly calm.

As if on cue, the pyukumyuku began its lurch towards the sky, bounding over the worn out roof tops. Annie thought she saw a chimney tumble towards the road.

Waveform climbed from his seat before they'd finished ascending and tugged his black bandana from his belt pouch. "Give me your arm."

Annie frowned up at him and raised an eyebrow. "I'm afraid it's rather attached."

"You're wounded," he said flatly.

"Eh?" She looked down at her left arm and her eyes almost popped from their sockets. Her white shirt was dyed bright red from just below her shoulder to her elbow. "When did that happen?"

"Unless you wish to undress," said Waveform calmly, "I'm going to have to cut the sleeve off."

Annie began to feel a little dizzy. She turned away from the stained sleeve, becoming increasingly aware of a dull ache beneath all that blood.

"Do as you will," she said weakly. "I think I'll just lie down on the floor for a little…" Her voice trailed off as her surroundings became a blur.

…

It was noon when Wildcard Gamma reached Cyan City. Anchor had Macro tucked comfortably on one arm as he clutched the ladder with another, descending down through the city's open dome. The cold air bit through his fur, and despite being used to it he was worried his trembling would cause him to drop his wounded captain.

Jumper stood below them by the lake, watching the ladder with his paws tucked behind his back. Beside him was an ambulance, its lights flashing from blue to green to red and back. Once the ladder

had descended enough, Anchor dropped down beside him. The frogadier's eyes went straight to Macro and they almost popped from his head.

"Good gracious! What on earth happened to him?!" he gasped. "Quickly. Into the ambulance."

He stepped aside to allow Anchor into the ambulance where a croconaw relieved him of the unconscious mawile. DL rushed to catch up with them with Defrag in tow, and he heard the ladder flash away rung by rung from Cyan City. Once they were all inside the ambulance, the doors slammed shut and it took off, sirens blaring.

"What's happened to him?" the croconaw asked.

"Stab wound," Defrag told him before Anchor could even open his mouth.

That was all the paramedic seemed to need to know as he rushed to his trolley and rustled through the various tools.

"Will he make it?" DL asked weakly.

A wartortle placed something over Macro's claw and stood back to watch the screen on the attached tablet.

"It's too soon to say," she said. "But we'll try everything." She turned to the croconaw. "His oxygen's low."

Anchor said nothing as the paramedics busied themselves around the stretcher. When the croconaw placed an oxygen mask over the mawile's muzzle, Anchor felt his heart sink into his stomach.

"You could have come in at the docks," said Jumper quietly. "I told you, you are welcome here."

"Well, old habits die hard," said Anchor. "Thanks for opening the dome for us by the way."

"It was scheduled to open now anyway," said Jumper. "Dawn and noon for optimal sunshine. The trees don't do as well in a completely closed off climate. It gets too hot for them, and the glass reduces the needed nutrients from the sun. So, are you going to tell me what happened?"

"I don't know what happened," said Anchor. "Apparently some invasive creature ran him through with bladed arms."

"Are you sure it wasn't a pawniard?"

"It wasn't a pawniard," said Defrag.

Jumper looked back at her and his eyebrows raised slightly. "I don't believe we've met. Are you another of Macro's crew?"

Defrag shook her head as Anchor snorted.

"She's a former crew member," said the granbull.

"I'm a detective, actually," said the lopunny. "Macro just happened to be in my city while I was investigating those creatures."

"There's been a lot of strange stuff happen recently," said Jumper. "That attack on Favicon for one. I am guessing it's related?"

Defrag's face creased in a frown. "I'm guessing news of the massacres in Spool City haven't made it this far?"

The frogadier's eyes widened and he blanched. "No…"

"Typical." Defrag tutted. "Rich cities don't care, do they?"

Jumper regained his composure and frowned, turning away from her as the ambulance came to a halt. The paramedics hoisted the stretcher from its stand and rushed out into the hospital, followed by Anchor and his companions. He only caught a glimpse of the croconaw's tail as it vanished through swinging doors to the 'Emergency Wards'.

Jumper settled himself into one of the many chairs and motioned for Anchor and the others to sit. DL faltered by the double doors, peering through the glass after the paramedics.

"I'm afraid they won't let you in," said Jumper. "Not just yet, anyway."

DL glanced from the frogadier to the doors then flopped into the chair beside him. She huddled into herself, staring blankly at the floor.

"I'm afraid it's just a waiting game now," said Jumper. "But I can assure you Macro is in very good paws."

"I sure hope so," said Anchor. "I've never seen him like this…"

DL shuddered and wiped a paw across her face. Jumper glanced towards her and placed a paw on her trembling back.

"I'm not sure how much help this is," said Jumper. "But there's a cafe if-"

"I couldn't eat a thing right now," said Anchor. "I feel like I've been hit in the gut by a close combat throwing lucario."

Defrag brushed back one of her ears and took in a shaky breath. "A coffee might actually calm my nerves."

Jumper looked over at her then at Anchor. The granbull shrugged his shoulders and knitted his paws together.

"You guys go," he said. "Take DL. I'll wait here in case anything comes up. Don't want 'em lookin' for us."

Jumper narrowed his eyes with concern. "If you're sure-"

"I'm sure." Anchor waved a huge paw. "Go. Don't worry about me. It ain't me you need to be worryin' about."

The frogadier nodded and rose to his feet, motioning DL to join him. She looked over at the door again then clambered shakily to her feet.

"I-" she stuttered. "I don't want to leave him…"

"If you want to wait here, I can bring you something?" said Jumper.

She shook her head slowly, then violently shook her ears before bolting through the double doors.

"DL!" Jumper took off after her and skidded to a halt in the hallway. "Oh, DL…"

The pachirisu sank down against one of the closed doors, the light above it a vivid red. It lit up her white fur like a sunset, and she placed a paw against the blue wood. Tears streaked from her eyes and she sobbed loudly, her entire body trembling.

Jumper crouched down beside her and placed a paw on her back. She pushed his paw away and screwed her eyes shut, trying to stifle the tears.

"I don't want him to die," she sobbed.

"Neither do I." Jumper's voice came out husky. "But I trust the surgeons here. Come on, trust him into their paws."

"I… I didn't know how dangerous those things were," she said. "We were only trying to find out the damage to Meta City. We didn't expect Spool City to… He was trying to get me onto the ship first. Then it…" She looked up and fixed watery, brown eyes on his. "If they're that dangerous, how are we meant to get those creatures back to their own world?!"

She broke down again, curling into a ball at the foot of the door. Jumper crouched beside her and gathered her into his arms, guiding the trembling pachirisu back to her feet.

"Let's get you sat back down. I'll get you a drink." He turned back to the doors to find Anchor watching them, waiting to see if he was needed. He fixed the granbull with a raised eyebrow. "You've really landed yourselves in quite the conspiracy, haven't you?"

Anchor let out a gruff 'hmm'. "I don't think it would have been such a rough landing if we'd gone in prepared."

…

Blinding sunlight filled Macro's vision. He flinched back from it and narrowed his eyes, straining to see through it. But it was all he could see. It was everywhere, blanketing his entire body. Blinding. Dazzling. Yet it was warm, not burning.

A shape formed inside it. A sun shape, solidifying into a face. A face he recognised.

Solgaleo looked down at him, his face soft and gentle. Yet Macro felt humbled, like he needed to fall to his knees. He became aware he was lying down, unable to move. His arms were paralysed at his sides.

Solgaleo smiled and he heard his voice coming from every direction at once.

"Wake up, Macro," he said. "It's not your time yet."

The light faded out into a soft white, then the white grew with a blinding intensity. His arm suddenly obeyed him and he lifted the heavy limb to his eyes. Solgaleo's face faded away, replaced by the soft, furry features of a worried pachirisu.

DL stared down at him, clutching his paw tightly in hers. He removed his other paw from his eyes and squinted into her warm, chocolate ones.

"Wow." His voice came out husky and sore. "You're a sight for sore eyes."

DL's face split into a beaming grin that rivalled the halogen lighting, and she clutched his paw to her chest. Fresh tears streamed over her damp cheeks and she shook her head slowly.

"I'm so glad you're awake." she said. "I was worried sick!"

Macro sighed and closed his eyes as the events came back to him. It was like a nightmare, yet he could still remember vividly the sensation of blood flooding his mouth and running out into his mask. The searing pain as the kartana withdrew its blade. He grimaced and lifted his paw to his face again, feeling the oxygen mask covering his muzzle. It was too familiar to the filter mask. He wanted to wrench it off. He fastened his claws underneath it, feeling a slight tug as he tensed his paw. He snapped his head around to it, spotting the drip fastened into his flesh. The sight made his stomach do an uncomfortable flip. In a hospital, strapped to a drip, having just clung onto life… His blood turned cold and he released the oxygen mask.

"I'm just glad to be alive." He took in a painful breath and let his eyes close again. "Argh, I feel like someone attacked my lungs with a cheese grater."

"The doctors said you're very lucky to be alive," said DL somewhat painfully.

Macro rubbed a paw over his groggy eyes. "Wouldn't be the first time I've had a near death experience."

He felt tiny claws dig into his paw. "They thought they were going to lose you. More than once. At one point… they really…" She choked back a sob and shook her head violently. "You almost bled to death! It's only thanks to Cookie's first aid skills you even made it to the hospital! That kartana sliced open your left lung and severed two of your ribs. It only narrowly missed your heart. If it had been a fraction closer…"

She trailed off and Macro cracked an eye open. She wasn't looking at him, instead staring at the foot of the bed. Her paws were still clasped around his, too firmly for him to wriggle it free. But not only did he feel too weak to try, he didn't want to. Instead he fastened his claws over her soft paw and she snapped her head around to look at him. Her mouth curled down at the sides and she let his paw flop onto the bed so she could wipe the tears from her cheeks. His paw felt oddly cold and he flexed his claws a couple of times before tucking it into his sheets.

"I'm so sorry," she choked.

"What for?"

"If I hadn't gone with you," more tears flooded from her eyes, "then you wouldn't have had to look after me. You wouldn't have-"

"What, you think this is your fault?!" Macro regretted raising his voice and he grimaced. "This isn't your fault, DL. Whether you went with me or not, those creatures would still have been there tearing up Spool City."

"Yes, but I shouldn't have gone with you. Anchor is much stronger than me. You should have taken him."

"It's still not your fault. I'm the captain. It's my job to make sure my crew is on the ship in dangerous situations. Or off it, for that matter."

"What about 'look out for number one'?"

He opened his mouth to reply, but his brain wouldn't process a response fast enough. He stared back into her eyes, still glistening with tears. Yet they were still warm. He felt himself melting into them, and his paw was desperate to find hers again. He clutched it to his chest, unseen under the sheets.

"I can't be a captain without a crew, can I?" he finally said.

Before she could reply, the door opened and Anchor strolled in clutching two steaming cups of fruit tea. When he spotted Macro he almost dropped them.

"Wow, Cap'n," he said, steadying the cups before the tea escaped to the floor. "The docs said you'd be asleep most of the night. It ain't even ten o'clock yet."

"Really?" Macro groaned as he rubbed the bridge of his muzzle. The oxygen mask was growing uncomfortable. "I guess I recover fast."

"Yeah? Hold on to that thought." Anchor turned to DL. "I thought you might want a tea."

"Thank you. But… I should probably let Jumper know Macro's awake."

She rose to her feet then stared down at Macro, her paws twitching at her sides. She lifted them back to her chest then headed for the door, gathering her cup off Anchor as she passed.

Anchor watched her go and waited for the door to close behind him. He turned back to Macro and shook his head sadly.

"She hasn't left your side since we were allowed in," he said.

"Really?" Macro's heart fluttered and he watched Anchor stroll across the room to claim DL's empty seat.

"Aye," he said. "Blames herself."

"But it isn't her fault," said Macro.

"Sadly she don't see it that way. But I do. I know you." Anchor sipped his hot tea then placed the cup on the bed's little stand. "What happened down there, Cap'n?"

"Has no one told you?"

"Two terrified girls have relayed me a story about a bladed Ultra Beast knocking you down and running you through with its arm," said Anchor. "Apparently you tried to take it on."

"That's true, I guess." Macro grimaced as he tried to sit up.

"You stay lay down!" Anchor barked. "I don't want you comin' undone!"

"If they did a good enough job, I shouldn't do."

Anchor placed a heavy paw on his shoulder and narrowed his eyes into a leer. "You stay lay down or I'm sittin' on yer legs."

Macro rolled his eyes and wriggled into his pillow.

"There's a good captain." Anchor took another sip of his tea and kept hold of his cup, warming his paws. "So you tried to take it on?"

"Yeh. It was fast. Couldn't hit it." Macro shrugged his shoulders painfully. "Once I'd angered it, that was it. It wanted blood."

"Aye, it got it n'all." Anchor frowned into his tea. "What were you playin' at?"

"I was trying to do my job. Find where they were comin' from. They're killing pokemon, and for what?"

"Your alarm should have gone off when you heard that! Get back on the ship, formulate a plan. Not run in there guns blazin' like you always do!" Anchor put his cup back down before he accidentally lobbed it across the ward with dramatic hand gestures. "I've told you before you're reckless. Throwin' yourself off buildings to escape, threatenin' government officials, jokin' about blowin' things up. It's like you forget you're mortal! Now look what's happened…"

"I know I'm mortal, Anchor."

"Then why act like that?"

Macro said nothing, letting the room fall into silence. He stared up at the ceiling, watching the fan spin rhythmically as it wafted cool air through the ward.

"I worry about you," said Anchor. "I might not bail on you like Digit did. I've always got your back, you know that. But I worry."

"You don't need to worry." Macro knew his words were pointless, and the glare from Anchor only served to prove his theory.

"Of course I need to worry! Look at you!" Anchor sighed and leant back in his seat. "I worry one day I'm gonna lose you, Macro. It frightens me. You're not just a captain to me, you're my best friend. No… you're my brother. And I'm not gonna let you behave like a reckless fool no more. You get me?"

Macro looked at him out of the corner of his eye. His throat tightened as a lump rose into it, but he choked back the threat of tears. Anchor stared down at him, his large eyes glistening, but his jaw was set with the sternness of a teacher waiting for a naughty hatchling to sit down.

Macro licked his dry lips and croaked out, "What if the situation calls for it?"

"Like what?"

He shrugged. "I dunno. We might all die anyway?"

Anchor let out a single laugh and retrieved his cup. "All right, sure. I'll let you have that one."

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 56

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Fifty Five

Macro couldn't help but feel relieved that he'd been removed from the drip. Sat back against a pillow, he sipped at what must have been his third cup of tea that morning.

Switch sat beside him in one of the many plastic chairs situated around the room, comfortable in his human form. None of the doctors were phased by his appearance. From what little he'd said since he'd arrived, Macro guessed he'd been walking around the entire city featherless.

Macro glanced at the time on his computer, and not for the first time. Thirty minutes had passed since Switch had walked in, all smiles and sunshine. Yet whenever Macro glanced him out of the corner of his eye, he looked bothered. Sad. Lonely? Whatever it was, he covered it up with a smile or one of his winks and what had been an awkward, fractured conversation about Macro's 'recent injury'.

"Okay." The mawile sighed and adjusted himself painfully so he could place his half-drunk still piping-hot tea back onto his bedside table. "I have to ask. Why are you walking around Cyan City with your human out?"

Switch raised an eyebrow and let out a confused 'huh?'

Macro gestured towards him with a paw. "This. I thought you'd be staying as a talonflame. You know… since there are no other humans in System?"

"That's where you're wrong." Switch sipped at his own cup. "There's one other human in System."

Wildcard's conversation with Solgaleo came back to Macro and his eyes widened slightly. "Oh… Oh yes, there is, isn't there? They escaped from Socket."

"A female," said Switch. "Apparently she's also been sighted as an archeops, and she's not shy about it either. In fact…" He fastened both hands around his cup and leant forward on his knees, staring blankly at the closed door. "I know who she is."

"Oh?" It was Macro's turn to raise an eyebrow. "A friend of yours?"

"No, but we were both in the same hospital when we first entered System. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to stabilise her form. Only one watch was made, and it wasn't by a doctor. The only reason I have it is because it turned out to be a failed experiment."

"What? And they couldn't make two?"

"Didn't want to." Switch shrugged. "Besides. This other human is very… mentally unstable. It's believed to be from her condition. That being unable to stabilise it sent her mad. But… If it was that, it was a very immediate thing. I doubt even with a stabilising watch she'd have been allowed out of her cell."

"I think that's pretty rotten, if I'm honest. How can they be so sure?"

Switch shrugged his shoulders. "Apparently her form is pretty stable now, somehow. And she punched the mayor."

Macro sputtered laughter, sending jolts of pain through his chest. He clasped his paw over it and took a few steadying breaths. When he looked up again, Switch was on his feet, staring down at him with a fearful look of concern.

"I'm fine," Macro wheezed. He stifled another wave of laugher, twisting his lips into a smirk. "Just… the thought of someone actually punching Socket really tickled me."

Switch slumped back down into his seat and let his face fall into his hands. His floppy red and brown hair fell between his fingers, masking what little Macro could still see of his face.

"What's the problem?" Macro asked. "I said I'm fine."

"If I'd been there," Switch muttered, "we could have handled those kartana."

"What are you talking about?" Macro spat. "Those things are deadly."

"Not entirely." Switch looked up again but he remained hunched over his knees. "They're apparently grass and steel type. One overheat from me and they would have been reduced to cinders. No threat to anyone."

"You're talking about killing them? We're meant to be getting them home!"

"How?! They can cut through iron!"

Macro shrugged and looked away, clutching his claws around his duvet. "I don't have it quite figured out yet."

"No, your last attempt to 'figure it out' almost got you killed!" Switch paused as Macro flinched at his words. "And where was I? Left here in Cyan City, forgotten about."

"You were recovering!" Macro swiftly regretted raising his voice. He screwed his eyes shut and huddled back into his pillow.

"Well…" Switch stared at him pointedly. "Now the shoe is on the other foot."

"What? You're gonna leave me here? Fly off and try to wipe out those kartana?"

"Not exactly. I'm going to wait for you to recover and help you wipe out those kartana."

"We're not wiping them out. We're getting them home." Macro flashed a canine. "And until you can get that into your thick skull, I won't tell you a single other thing about this mission."

"Too late." Switch sat back and tucked his hands behind his head. "Your crew already have."

Macro's jaw dropped and he stared back at the human, speechless.

"So unless you can find a box that they can't cut through," Switch went on, "I'm stumped as to how we're gonna get them back into their own world. Because I doubt they're going to listen to reason."

"We could bait them?"

"How? Dangle you in front of them like a carrot?"

Macro visibly flinched and fired Switch a glare. "What?"

"I dunno, I just thought they might want to finish you off." Switch winked and looked back at the door. "I'm sorry. I'm just a little bitter that the only time you even bother to come back here is when your crew is dragging you half dead across System Sky."

Macro closed his eyes and sighed. It was inevitable Switch would feel that way. How was he meant to explain that Cyan City was the safest place? He'd almost died. His loss could alter history, affect the present in unimaginable, unpredictable ways.

"I promised we'd get you home," he said. "You really think we weren't gonna come back for you?"

"It was getting that way. But… I kept myself busy." Switch pulled his computer out of his pocket and scrolled over the screen. "I've been looking into where the twins might have been taken, since no one has found their bodies. And the bug types are being rehabilitated and studied in hopes they can get some identity back. So I've been assisting there, too." He glanced up briefly. "It pays well."

Macro let out a non-committal grunt. "We were gonna come back. One of the Z Crystals we were given is meant for you."

"I believe you." Switch looked up from his computer and let it fall into his lap. "Just remember I'm more useful to you on your ship than hidden away in this city."

"But they've needed you, right?"

Switch shrugged. "I've just been making myself useful, really. Helping clean up after that invasion, doing detective work… I'd much rather be trying to get myself back home."

"Well, once I'm out of here, we can sort that out, can't we?" It was becoming a strain to talk. Macro reached for his teacup, claws barely reaching it.

Switch leant forwards and handed Macro his cup before rising to his feet. "I'll let you finish resting. I need to get back to the station anyway. Floppy will be wanting his break." Macro watched him cross the ward and he paused at the door. "Take care of yourself. Don't do anything foolish. It'll take a while for those wounds to heal, even with Cyan City's advanced medicine."

With that, he slipped out of the room.

Macro sighed and sipped at his tea, now almost tepid. He considered downing it, but the effects of three cups of tea and several glasses of water were really beginning to take their toll on him. He discarded the cup back onto the table and carefully swung himself over the edge of the bed. His eye went to the bucket tucked underneath it and his muzzle creased in a grimace.

No. Not today.

It might have been a private room, but it wasn't an en-suite. Not being attached to that drip was a real blessing. It meant he wouldn't have to drag it after him.

He dropped to the floor with a grunt and staggered to the door, peering out into the hallway. Switch was already long gone, and the only other pokemon he could see was a cleaner. A minccino. One of the few normal types he'd seen in Cyan City. He wouldn't stop him.

Macro placed a paw to his chest and walked as carefully and as evenly as he could to the rest rooms. Fortunately only a stone throw a way. They were as brightly lit with florescent lighting as the rest of the hospital, reflecting off the porcelain with a blinding intensity he felt ashamed to admit he'd grown used to. The biting smell of bleach and floral air freshener meant the minccino had recently cleaned everything until it shone. The yellow slip hazard cone was still situated in the middle of the floor, fortunately not providing a trip hazard.

He briefly considered resigning himself to the bucket but shook it off. Not when he knew for a fact DL was due to visit him within the next ten minutes. Knowing his luck, she'd be early.

Every movement was a chore, and the slippery floor didn't help. He moved at a snails pace to the nearest convenience and caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. It was either the lighting, or he looked pale. He couldn't tell. Sure he'd lost a lot of blood, but they'd given him a transfusion to replace it so that wasn't an issue. Maybe it was the food? He'd grown too used to Cookie's cooking or something. He sincerely doubted he was still in shock.

He grimaced as he turned himself away towards the door, grateful for the automatic flush feature. There was no way he'd be able to stretch for one. Washing his paws was enough of a chore.

As he paced slowly back into the hall, the smell of cleaning alcohol biting at him, he scratched a claw over his scar. Rose petals wafted up from his paw, or they may as well have done. Everything just smelled wrong. Oh how he yearned for his ship.

When he staggered back into his room, DL spun on the spot to face him, almost scaring him out of his skin. His chest complained and he

pressed a paw against it as he made for his bed.

DL caught him and helped him back upon it, her face turning from worried to angry in an instant.

"What on earth are you doing?" she scolded. "I thought you'd gone and left!"

"I had to use the bathroom," he grumbled. "Like any normal 'mon."

DL pursed her lips together and glanced down away from him towards the floor. He knew where she was looking and he rolled his eyes, expecting a lecture. Instead, she picked up a plastic bag from the chair.

"I brought you lunch," she said. "I know you're sick of hospital food."

"You're a star."

He tried to push himself up, suddenly feeling a lot more alert. She stopped him so she could adjust his pillow and let him sit back against it. Once she was satisfied, she returned to rummaging through the bag. Her tail was held high over her back, ears forward and nose crinkled slightly as she occupied herself with her task. Seeing her like that made him feel warm inside.

"I know you like your nutpea and occa burgers, but they didn't have that," she explained. "They did, however, have nutpea and occa sandwiches. Not quite the same, but-"

"It sounds great."

She looked up at him and smiled, then held out the neatly wrapped sandwich. He took it from her in both paws, meeting her eyes briefly.

"Do you need me to open it?" she asked.

"I think I'm okay."

She nodded and scooped more items from the bag, setting them on the fold over table the doctors generally reserve for plated meals. From the variety she laid out before him, she may as well have been organising a buffet. Fruit cups, jelly, cakes, sweet bread, cereal bars, and a couple more sandwiches. She caught the baffled look on his face as he sat with his sandwich half way to his mouth.

"Yeh…" She chuckled and looked over the spread. "I went a little crazy."

"Well, at least I won't be going nuts over the bland food anymore." He took a bite from his sandwich and nearly swooned.

She sat in the chair beside him and reached for a sandwich of her own, which from a glance may have been cheri jam.

"Switch visited today," he told her.

"Yes, he said he was planning to."

"He's pretty wounded we left him here," Macro explained. "I guess I should have called him."

"Ideally." DL stared at her sandwich thoughtfully then took a bite.

"So you think I did the wrong thing?"

She shrugged and swallowed her mouthful. "We were busy. I mean… you probably never really found time… a lot has been going on."

"Why do I feel like you're giving me the same explanation you gave him?"

"It's difficult," she said through an exasperated sigh. "We're meant to be helping him. So leaving him here seemed sensible. He almost got killed."

"Exactly." Macro took another bite of his sandwich. "If he got killed, how would it affect us? Now, in this time-line?"

She looked up with a start, the surprise marred slightly by a streak of jam across her nose. "What exactly are you worried about?"

"You've heard of the butterfly effect, right?"

She nodded.

"If he really is connected to my ancestors, then if something happened to him… what would happen to me? That's just one example. There's also issues with System, too. How much of an impact did one human staying in System have on the rest of history? It's hardly a trivial matter living with an alien species, is it? You just have to look at what the Ultra Beasts are doing to understand that."

DL stared down at what little was left of her meal. "I hadn't really considered that."

"Neither had I until he almost got killed." Macro took another huge bite of his sandwich.

"I guess we need to be careful, don't we?"

The room fell into a heavy silence and Macro felt his appetite being pulled away from him. Regardless, he resigned to finish the majority of his sandwich before discarding the remains into the waste paper basket.

DL licked jam off her paws and looked from him to the small table. "Which cake would you like?"

"None right now, thank you."

"Okay, maybe later then?" She leant forwards and scooped the rest of the 'buffet' into her shopping bag. Her paw faltered over a heavily iced cake and her claws flexed.

"If you want one, have one," he said, masking a chuckle.

She made a thoughtful noise and glanced back at him over her shoulder. "Maybe later."

"That's some restraint." He tucked his paws behind his head, grimacing with the effort, and leant awkwardly back against his pillow.

"I was… hoping to share that one with you." She placed the cake carefully in the bag then looked over at him. "If it hurts, don't sit like that!"

"It's not so much pain as stiffness." He moved his arms back in front of him and tried to stretch them out, flinching visibly. "It's my lung and ribs that hurt."

"You're probably stiff from the surgery." She watched him lean forwards, then she sat up with a start and reached under her seat. "That reminds me, I got your scarf repaired."

He looked over his shoulder at her then sat upright again. She pulled his scarf out of another plastic bag and unravelled it. The damage was barely noticeable, save for where the neon blue pattern didn't quite line up.

"It got quite cut up in that battle," she said sadly. "I had it cleaned and repaired. You will barely be able to tell when it's on."

"Thank you," he said.

"I guess you don't want to wear it in bed, but it's here for when you want it."

She folded it neatly and carried it over to the bedside table where she tucked it away in its lone drawer. As she returned to her seat, she eyed him stretching again. Her paw went to her ear and she sat back down, glancing towards the door.

"I feel a bit awkward offering this," she said. "But if it's really bothering you, I can help ease the tension out?"

He stared at her, but she wouldn't meet his eye, instead nervously glancing around the room particularly at the door.

"I know I've done it before, but I didn't have my memories or my personality then," she said. "So if you think it would be too… weird…"

"Hey, it helped the last time." He diverted his gaze to the far wall. "It might help again, so…"

"Okay. I'll be sure to avoid your damaged ribs." She perched on the edge of his bed and reached up to his shoulders. "But if this hurts at all, you tell me. I don't want to make things worse."

He chuckled dryly and rolled his eyes. "Yes doctor."

If she responded, he didn't see it. She fastened her paws over his shoulders and squeezed them together, working into his muscles. His eyes fell shut as he felt the tension being slowly worked out. If anything, it was less the surgery that had caused the tension and more recent events wrecking havoc on his stress levels. Lying in bed for the past two days hadn't helped matters either.

"I'm still curious about these markings." She trailed a paw down his back then lifted it back up to his right shoulder.

"I haven't a clue either," he said. "My mother had them too. She always said it's cos she thought we might have a pikachu in our family tree. But if that were the case, why don't more pokemon have odd markings?"

She let out a small laugh and began working down his back, widely avoiding the left side. "I don't think you've ever mentioned your mother."

"Yeh, I don't like to think about it."

"Really? Did something bad happen?"

He was silent as his mind went back to his childhood, and he hugged his arms around his knees. "She was really sick. She died before I even left school."

"Oh, I'm sorry." DL faltered and he felt her claws brush through his fur as she sat back slightly. "We can change the subject if you want?"

He shrugged. "I was a jerk of a kid. I just wish I'd done more. Not long after she passed I became a space pirate, for crying out loud."

"And I guess that's when you met Digit?"

"Yeh." He paused and cracked an eye open. "What happened to her, anyway? I've not heard from her since she showed up to drag Anchor off for dinner yesterday."

"She's still here." He winced as she dug into his right shoulder and she muttered something about him having a knot. "She's lurking around the police station. She can't go very far since she used your ship to get here."

The tone in her voice told him he was better changing the conversation. He glanced over his shoulder, but all he could see was the white of her paw.

"Any news about the Ultra Beasts?"

"Don't worry about them," she said. "Focus on getting better. Then you can go back to worrying and maybe we can even try out those Z-Moves."

"That sounds like a plan."

"It would also be a good idea to give Switch his when we do. I'm sure he'll be happy to practice with us."

She trailed her paws down his back and he let his eyes close again. Not worrying. It was easier said than done, especially when he knew full well that strange creatures from other worlds were destroying System and killing pokemon. He'd almost added to that list of casualties himself. He took in a deep breath, noting the awful stab in the left of his chest. How long would it take him to recover from that? Would he be going back into battle before he'd fully recovered?

His mind snapped back to DL, her paws still trailing up and down his back. But it wasn't so much a massage any more than her claws combing through his fur, starting at his waist where it grew longer to form his skirt then all the way up to the shorter fur around his shoulders. It stirred up odd bubbles in his stomach and he straightened, raising his right paw to grab her left. He twisted to face her, meeting her warm eyes. Chocolate fondue that he could get lost in. As she stared back at him, it made every bubble pop one after the other. She was close enough that he could feel her breath on his muzzle. She slipped her paw out from his and reached up to his face, brushing back a lock of black fur.

The door flew open and she leapt back from him like a hatchling from a hot stove hob. Jumper strolled into the room and looked from each of them back to Macro.

"You're looking much better." Jumper turned back to DL and gave her an apologetic smile. "Would you mind excusing us for a moment? I have something I'd like to discuss in private."

DL muttered an apology and adjusted Macro's pillow before gathering her bag and trotting towards the door. She paused in the doorway to give Jumper a pointed look.

"Don't stress him out with bad news," she said.

"Oh, I can assure you it's good news," he said.

"That's okay then." She slipped from the room, letting the door close quietly behind her.

Jumper turned back to Macro and cleared his throat. "She seems rather highly strung."

"It was the other way around before." Macro fell back against his pillow and tucked his arms behind his head, much easier this time. Then he raised an eyebrow at the frogadier. "What do you want, Gov? Is it really good news?"

"It depends on your perspective." Jumper leant against the wall and folded his arms. "I am under the impression you are no longer welcome in Pulse City?"

"No, I'm not. Socket raised the stakes." Macro narrowed his eyes at him. "Why?"

Jumper cleared his throat again and diverted his gaze to the window. "Your problem with pirates trying to claim your bounty may be very short lived."

"What are you getting at, Governor?" Macro's voice came out as a growl.

"One of those Ultra Beasts has set up home there," said Jumper slowly. "The city is being reduced to ruins."

…

Huge.

Immensely huge.

That's how that creature was burned into Tracer's memory.

Huge. Towering over the buildings. A haunting scream echoing as it blasted the city to oblivion.

And what had Tracer done? Screamed at them to run. N0ize hadn't needed telling twice. He pulled his ship away and leapt into hyperdrive, leaving Pulse City and its inhabitants to the mercy of the monster.

Run…

Tracer lay on musty sheets, his arm plastered over his eyes. The dull drone of the engine melded with Widget's snores and a deep rumble he assumed was one of the space pirates. Given he'd shared a room with N0ize not two nights before, he assumed the racket belonged to him.

The delphox let his arm fall to his side and stared at the black ceiling. Blackness. Nothingness. The space pirates' choice of decor didn't make him feel any better. He pushed himself up and slumped forward, all energy failing him. His eyes felt heavy, yet sleep wouldn't come to him. All he kept seeing was that monster. Mortified at the thought of leaving hundreds of pokemon to make their own escape, or to fight against it.

He was meant to stop crime. Put the needs of other pokemon first. And what had he done? He'd ran.

He reached into his trench coat and pulled out a cigar, ignoring the scorning mental voice that followed. What N0ize didn't know didn't hurt him. He leant back against his pillow and lit it up, watching as a trail of glowing embers trickled from it to land harmlessly on his warm fur. Well… if he did accidentally light the sheets on fire, at least they'd add some light to the pitch black room.

A soft yawn came from the floor and Widget's eyes fluttered open, fixing on Tracer. What dim light his cigar gave off reflected off the eevee's eyes, amplified by some hidden device, and shined back at him like a pair of tiny torches. Something that only worked in dim lighting, making up for the pokemon's lack of night vision.

"Still can't sleep, huh?" Widget asked before yawning again.

"No." Tracer puffed out a ring and lost sight of it as it drifted slowly away from him. "I was hoping this might soothe me to sleep."

Widget rolled onto his back and stretched his legs towards the ceiling. "I think you said that about an hour ago, too."

So time was going by that slowly? Tracer took another drag and narrowed his eyes at the shadows. He needed off this ship. He needed to know what was happening in Pulse City. But the news hadn't updated since the previous morning. For all he knew, it had been reduced to a floating hunk of steel and rock. Raining its remains down onto Baud City. As if that city hadn't suffered enough already.

He pulled his tablet computer from his inside pocket and checked their progress. The intricate interactive map told him they were flying away from Spool City in a vague northerly direction. Either they were drifting aimlessly, or Annie was on the move again. Fortunately after their fright, they'd picked up her location. She'd been lurking in the outskirts for some unknown reason, and rather than drop in they'd stayed above the clouds and waited for her to make the first move. Unfortunately his computer didn't tell him where she was.

He let his arm flop to the bed, where the tablet shone its weak light towards the ceiling. It lit up a portion of his face and cast erratic shadows against the drapes.

"I need to get off this ship," he said with a sigh.

"Aye." Widget sat up and scratched behind his ear with a hind foot. "I'm gettin' cabin fever."

Tracer swung his legs over the edge of the bed and rubbed the bridge of his muzzle between two claws. "If we don't land soon, I'm grabbing a parachute."

"It'll be a long way down." Widget grinned from ear to ear. "Count me in. It sounds fun."

Tracer let out a bitter laugh and shook his head, looking over at the weak light slowly making its way through the heavy curtain. "I guess it's dawn."

"Guess so." Widget yawned so wide his jaw popped. "Mind if I open the drapes? I wanna see the clouds again."

The eevee rose to his hind feet and whisked the curtain aside. A deep orange glow reflected off the surface of the wide, fluffy clouds, paling to a golden glow at the edges. Tracer had to hand it to the space pirates. They got to see sights like this almost every day. New clouds. New locations. New sunrises.

He sighed, blowing out a stream of smoke that almost seemed to merge with the dramatic skyscape. A new dawn. Yet sadly, many pokemon wouldn't get to see it.

…

I used 'butterfly effect' rather than 'butterfree' etc because there's more than one butterfly pokemon, and using one over the other didn't make much sense. Especially given, in narration, each one would be referred to as a butterfly. Just felt I needed to explain that =)

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 57

A/N - Thanks for all faves, reviews and follows! =D

Chapter Fifty Six

Socket stared out of her office window with a combination of mourning and loathing. The strange lanky creatures sprawled themselves over the mechanical trees and the walls of every building she could see. Every building except hers. A huge, perspex dome surrounded the mansion, cutting her off from the outside world and greatly reducing the invasion of toxic air from the outskirts.

Mechanical trees lay bent like bows amid debris from fallen ships. They hadn't even stood a chance, becoming fodder for the electrical monstrosities. Barely a dent had been made in the creatures' numbers. Some of the trees were even broken completely, their innards sparking as the aliens fed from them. But they had no faces to speak of, no mouths to feed with. They used their 'legs', attaching them to the wires and letting the current run up their wiry limbs to fuel the jagged fur that formed their 'heads'.

Her gut burned, flooding her body with hatred. It wasn't BackDoor that was solely responsible for this. Sure, the android had opened a gateway to another world, but that was its job. No, it wasn't BackDoor's responsibility. It wasn't her perfect plan that had gone awry. It was that wretched space pirate. If she'd had Download Database, she'd have been able to keep a tab on the gateways. Monitor them. Close them if things looked to be getting out of hand.

But no. She hadn't had Download Database. Her connection to the portholes had been fed through BackDoor's own childish rambling and gloating reports. Rather than send the information directly to Download Database, along with every other android in his network, he'd had to report back to Socket himself. A pokemon who rarely went outside. A pokemon who relied on her scientist. A pokemon

who only wanted what was best for those who stuck to her law, and that wretched Hunter had wrecked everything.

Now she'd had to press her big, red eject button before her plan had even reached completion. Her eyes went up to the cloud of toxic fog slowly darkening the sky to a murky yellowish brown. It wouldn't be long until it penetrated the mansion's barrier.

She span towards her holoscreen and flicked it on, her claw automatically dialling Yobi. It only rang once before the sparksurfer raichu appeared before her.

"How are you getting on?" she asked before he could even open his mouth.

"Time is of the essence, Mayor," he replied. "We should hopefully be out of Meta City by dawn."

Socket nibbled her claw and looked over her shoulder at the electrical apocalypse.

"That dome is state of the art," he told her. "It's meant to hold back a full blown riot. Not to mention it doesn't even give off a charge. Even a thunderstorm couldn't wreck it. I doubt those creatures will."

"But the air…"

"Can get through, yes. We still need filters, and for something pretty old it's doing the best it can."

"How long before that air poisons us?"

The raichu's ominous silence set her fur on end. She leered at him until he finally met her eyes again.

"I erm…" He scratched his nose, leaving behind a greasy streak. "I'm working on getting us out of here non stop, but everything is ancient. I can only go so fast."

"Go faster."

Yobi stared out at her for an uncomfortable moment, watching the gothitelle twitch as her eyes went from the window to the holoscreen. All she could hear from his lab was the dull drone of some hidden machine and Tweak's jingling and chuckling. Finally, he let out a sigh and nodded.

"I promise you, we'll be out of here by dawn," he said.

She spun back to him with a start. "So it will be ready?"

"It might not be perfect, but it will at least get us out of the air. And out of range of those creatures."

"I thought you said this barrier was impenetrable to them?" She narrowed her eyes, prompting a response.

"I didn't say 'impenetrable'," he said. "I said 'I doubt they can wreck it'. Besides, with all the electricity they're indulging in, I can't see them turning on the mansion in a desperate frenzy anytime soon. Hold tight. Sleep if you need to."

Before she could reply, he cut out, vanishing before her eyes. She leant back against her desk and gazed around her office.

Empty. Silent.

It crossed her mind to call Tweak back from his laboratory assistance, but that may only slow things down. For the first time in a long time, she really didn't want to be alone.

…

Macro stared at Jumper, dumbfounded. Had he heard him right? No… surely it was just another nightmare?

He pushed himself up against the pillow and fixed the governor in a violet plea. "You're lying, right? Pulse City isn't…"

"I'm not lying, Macro," said Jumper. "Most of System is under attack from these monsters. Your crew explained to me about what happened in Spool City, and that wasn't even your target for investigation. You were trying to monitor the chaos in Meta City, which, as we speak, is falling apart at the seams. The only footage we have of Pulse City is a blurred shot taken from a fleeing ship, uploaded to the Underground News, and what we can make out looks like a post-apocalyptic wasteland."

Macro narrowed his eyes, fighting back tears. But a couple betrayed him and hung around at the corners of his eyes. "Are you trying to hurt me? Pulse City is my home!"

"I'm not trying to hurt you!" Jumper gasped. "Of course not. I felt obligated to let you know. It would be deceitful of me to let you go back there without telling you what state it lay in. Hundreds have been killed already."

"Hundreds…" Macro flopped back against the pillow and rubbed his paws over his face. "I have friends there. Sure we're a rough lot, and I also had a lot of enemies and rivals. But I still had friends! How am I meant to know-"

Jumper raised a paw to silence him. "We don't know for certain who managed to escape and who was trapped, but there's a list of confirmed casualties from those who… witnessed things before they managed to leave."

"Any idea which Ultra Beast it is? Which one that done it?"

Jumper clasped his paws behind his back and leant against the wall, diverting his gaze to the window. "It has been described as a bamboo cannon with a deathly wail."

Macro felt his blood turn cold. Every fur on his body stood on end and he tugged the duvet up to his chest. Unconsciously, he followed the frogadier's gaze, but his mind was on that creature. The same thing that had terrified him. And it had reduced Pulse City to ruins…

"I can't handle this, gov." He shoved the duvet off himself and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. Every movement caused his chest to complain, but he grit his teeth and pushed through it. "I need a walk. Clear my head."

"I can't allow that." Jumper was at his side and placed a paw on his shoulder. "The only activities you're meant to have are your scheduled rehabilitation exercises. If you push yourself too much you're going to hamper your recovery time. Maybe even take a step back."

Macro narrowed his eyes. "I thought rich city medicine was supposed to encourage a quick recovery?"

"It does, but it doesn't work miracles. You still need rest."

"I can't rest with that nightmare of an image floating around my head!"

Jumper sighed and released the mawile. "Maybe I told you too soon. I just felt you had a right to know."

"No, you did the right thing." Macro leant forward on his knees and stared at the door. He clenched his teeth together and dropped to his feet. "No sense in dreamin' about a home that ain't there anymore, is there?"

Jumper watched him as he reached for his scarf, grimacing at the effort to wrap it around his shoulders.

"At least let me get you a wheelchair," the governor offered.

"I ain't no invalid."

"Right now you are!" Even though Jumper didn't raise his voice, it was firm enough to cause Macro to glance at him. "I implore you, please look after yourself. If you want to go out and clear your head,

that's fine. We have a means of getting you there, and the hospital has a beautiful garden."

"But I don't want others to see me like that."

Jumper raised an eyebrow. "Why not?"

Macro shrugged, painfully, and looked away. "It makes me look vulnerable."

Jumper was silent for a moment, but he didn't take his eyes off the mawile. Macro shifted under his gaze, feeling his strength wane with the effort of holding himself up. He took a step back towards the bed just to give himself something to lean on, an action he immediately regretted.

"We're all mortal." Jumper's words caused him to look up with a start. "We're all vulnerable for that reason. You nearly died. You're fortunate to even still be here."

"It ain't the first time I nearly died. First time, I almost lost an eye. This time, I lost my pride. I've never fallen in battle like that."

"You don't need pride. What others think is irrelevant." Jumper gave him a small smile. "Besides, I've been in a wheelchair before. Voluntarily. I did it to raise awareness, and I have to say I enjoyed it. You might find it quite fun."

Macro's muzzle creased into a sneer. "This ain't about fun."

"Listen here, Macro. The only way you're leaving this room is in a wheelchair. It's in your best interests, and if you keep being stubborn I'm going to encase you in frubbles and bury you in sheets."

Macro raised an eyebrow and looked from Jumper's face to the scarf-like foam around his neck. His heart sank. He was in no shape to fight, and he actually didn't want to. Part of him understood the frogadier's concern. He let out a defeated sigh and rolled his eyes.

"Fine, get the wretched chair." Before Jumper could reach the door, Macro locked him in a violet glare. "But I'll make you a deal, okay? I only use it when I can't walk no more."

Jumper stared at him over his shoulder and he shook his head. "You're a stubborn one, aren't you? Fine. If you want to go down fighting, I'll let you have this one. But they aren't light. You may need assistance. You won't be able to push it yourself in your condition."

Macro's lips formed a frown as the image of Anchor wheeling him along lit up in his mind. No… he was meant to carry his crew, not the other way around. What was left of his pride shattered like brittle glass. He forced his dismay to the back of his mind and fixed his eyes on Jumper.

"Anchor or DL would be fine," he said. "I doubt Matrix could - or would - do it."

"Very well." Jumper gave him a nod and slipped from the room.

Macro stared at the door as it closed behind him, his eyes slowly narrowing. No. He wasn't having that. It was the last straw that would break his back.

He pushed himself from the bed and walked as steadily as he possibly could to the door. Peering out, he checked the coast was clear. No sign of Jumper or any of Wildcard. It would take too long to get the schematics for the hospital. He'd need to rely on signs, and he didn't even know what floor he was on. From his window, he knew it wasn't the ground floor.

He let the door close behind him and turned towards the double doors at the end of the corridor. Using his paw to steady him against the wall, he pushed himself towards them. Only three more private wards separated him from what he hoped was an elevator to the entrance.

Unlikely.

And he didn't see a single sign for the garden Jumper had told him about.

The double doors swung open with ease, a necessity given the number of stretchers whipped through them to emergency wards. But Macro's heart sank as he stared out at a waiting area filled with patients, visitors, chairs and nurses. Two nurses bustled around a small kitchenette making up fresh drinks for the ward, and perched on a chair amongst all the water type pokemon was Anchor. The granbull had his head down as he messed with his computer, a look of pure focus on his face. Macro had no doubts he'd be able to sneak past him.

Provided the nurses didn't give him a hard time.

He wrapped an air of nonchalance about himself and strut-staggered his way across the room. A convenient nurse passed him, blocking him from the granbull's peripheral vision. But as he reached the next set of doors, a simipour nurse eyed him curiously. She followed him with her eyes as he pushed through the doors, trying his best not to look at her.

"Excuse me," she said quietly, so as not to draw attention to them. "I don't think you're meant to be out of your ward."

Macro kept going, drawing the nurse after him. A quick glance over his shoulder told him Anchor had looked up but only to retrieve a steaming cup of tea from a marill.

"I need some air," Macro said flatly. "Where's this 'amazing garden' this hospital is meant to have?"

"It's on the ground floor," the simipour explained. "Just before you reach the cafeteria. But you still shouldn't be walking."

"Don't worry, I won't take the stairs." He paused and licked his lips thoughtfully. "Where's the elevator?"

The simipour stared at him as though trying to read him, her eyes narrowed slightly. In one paw she held a digital Clipboard, a computer specific to hospitals, and if Macro were to guess his information would be on there amongst the host of other patients she attended to. Either way, he didn't recognise her. Maybe she'd attended to him when he was unconscious? Half dead, clinging to life… The thought made him bite his lip hard.

"You're close," she said. "Go through the next set of doors and you'll reach the stairwell. They're right there. Go to the ground floor and turn left. You can't miss the garden."

He glanced up at her, noting her flick through the Clipboard's screen. She met his eyes briefly and she nodded to the doors ahead of them. He muttered a quick 'cheers' and guided himself along the wall with his paw. She said nothing as she watched him go. Watching him intensely in case he collapsed.

He wasn't going to let that happen.

Just as she'd said, the elevators rose up on his right. One was already waiting, and he climbed inside, clutching the rail. The glass chamber gave him a fantastic view of Cyan City. The lush green grass, clean air, happy pokemon. Most of it had been repaired after their clash with the grass types.

Pulse City floated through his mind, a ruined mound topped with a wailing monstrosity. He shivered. How long would it take to repair? Would it even be possible? He hoped desperately Jumper's use of the term 'ruins' was a huge overstatement.

The elevator came to a smooth stop and let him out on the ground floor. It was oddly empty. He found the garden straight away, on his right. It appeared to be attached to the cafeteria, but just like the hallway it was empty. The cafeteria was a different matter. He could see it clearly through the glass panels that made up the wall, providing diners with a clear view of the garden, complete with its

own horsea-shaped water fountain. He could hear its gentle gurgling from where he stood.

The doors to it weren't open, but a push of a button made them slide open with a gentle hiss. He soon discovered why it was empty. There was a slight chill to the air. He glanced up, but the dome was still above them. Cyan City sometimes opened it for the orchards. Perhaps noon was one of those times?

He hugged his scarf around himself and found a suitable bench, slumping down onto it with a pained sigh. Finally. Some air. Some peace. Some time to mull over what a mess his life had become over the past few weeks.

Socket cranking up his bounty. Getting sucked into her twisted conspiracy. Almost dying. Losing his home. He quite literally had the past, and the responsibility for his own present and future, resting in his paws in the form of a lost human. And on top of getting Switch home he had to also find a way to send back a host of dangerous creatures who, from his experience, would no sooner look at a pokemon than kill them.

Part of him wished it was all a bad dream. That he'd wake up from a bad night at Moonlight Lounge with a killer hangover. He rubbed the bridge of his muzzle between two claws and groaned. He felt groggy thanks to those powerful painkillers. And exhausted. Maybe he could just curl up on the cold bench and…

"Macro!"

He looked up, one arm resting on the arm of the bench while the other still rubbed at his muzzle. Anchor raced into the garden with DL and Switch in tow. Behind them he spotted both Matrix and Jumper on the other side of the glass. Not a wheelchair in sight. The frogadier looked sullen. Disappointed. For some reason, that bothered Macro greatly.

He grimaced and looked away, straining to push himself back up.

"What on earth's got into you?" Anchor asked.

"Nothin'," said Macro. "I just needed some air."

"Air my ass." Anchor stopped before him and placed a claw under Macro's chin, lifting his face so he could meet his eyes.

Macro swiped his paw away, fixing the granbull in a leer. "I said I needed air. I had to get out of that stuffy room and clear my head."

Anchor stood back and sat beside Switch on the stone wall around the fountain. DL was the only one who clambered up onto the bench beside Macro. She hugged her tail into her lap, looking anywhere but at her friends.

"Look, Cap'n," said Anchor. "We're worried about you. That nurse said you had a warnin' look in your eye. Like if she stopped you, she'd regret it. I know you're reckless 'n' all, but… You can't blow our freedom here, we ain't got nowhere else to go."

Macro sighed into his paw. "I weren't gonna hurt her. I just…"

"This is about Pulse City, isn't it?" Switch asked, letting his computer fall limply in his lap. "Believe me, I understand how you feel. I lost a lot of friends when the drifting continents crashed."

Macro glanced up at him and shook his head sadly. "Friends, home, work… I don't even know who got out. Did Worm? Surge?"

Anchor shrugged weakly, not meeting his eyes. "I dunno. But I mean… space pirates bounce back. Once we get them creatures home, it can be rebuilt."

"Listen to yourself," Macro groaned. "'Once we get them home'. How? You've seen what they can do! How are we meant to catch them and get them back? Use a huge net?!"

He immediately regretted raising his voice. His breath caught in his throat as pain shot through his ribs and he coughed violently into his

paw. Anchor and Switch leapt to their feet, while DL spun on the spot and placed a paw on Macro's shoulder. He shrugged her off and waved his paw, taking steady breaths to ease his breathing. A metallic taste filled his mouth. He looked down at his paw and relief flooded him when he saw it was clear of any blood.

"Look," said Anchor. "You clearly need to get back to your bed. We can plan how to do this while you're recovering, if it helps. Get the ball rollin'."

"But the damage they're causing." Macro wheezed as he pushed himself upright off the arm of the bench. "They need getting out of System sooner, not later."

"Exactly," said Anchor. "And we're the 'mon that have been asked to do it. But the more you try to rush your recovery time, the longer it's gonna take for you to get outta here. And, as a result, the longer those Ultra Beasts are gonna be wreckin' up the joint."

"He has a point," said Switch before Macro could retort. "Before you got yourself hurt, you didn't have my help. But now you're back here, you do. So your team isn't one 'mon down. We can come up with a plan while you recover, and we'll discuss things with you. Once you're out, we can get straight to work. I suggest we start with the smaller threats."

"What would you deem a smaller threat?" Macro asked.

"I dunno." Switch flicked his computer and turned it to Macro. A large, clear picture of the xurkitree feeding off mechanical trees filled it. "I'd say these. Off the top of my head, we could bait them. Give them something electrical to chase after. Lure them into their home world."

Macro blinked up at the human, absorbing what he'd said. It made sense, and it just might work. But it was still only one Ultra Beast species out of the several that had invaded System. He sincerely

doubted an electronic lure would work on the celesteela wreaking havoc on Pulse City. Nevertheless, he gave Switch a weak smile.

"All right," he said. "You all work together. Come up with some ideas. We'll iron them out and put them to the test when I can get out of this…" He waved a paw at his surroundings, wanting to say 'cell'. But it was hardly a prison. He let his paw flop to his side and took a ragged breath. "You know what I mean."

The look on Anchor's face told him he'd assumed 'cell'. The granbull nodded then gestured to the frogadier waiting in the doorway. "Want us to get your chair and wheel you back?"

"No." Macro shook his head, not daring to look at the governor. "I still need some air and space to think. Alone, not with doctors fussing over me. I'll see you later."

Anchor raised an eyebrow, a small frown playing at his muzzle. "But how do you expect to get back?"

"Same way I got here."

"Cap'n…" Anchor's voice was a near-growl.

"Look, if I need help I'll ask for it." Macro sighed, feeling his energy draining away. "Just leave me for a while."

Anchor opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. His expression softened and he nodded once before ushering Switch after him. Macro watched him go, catching Jumper's eye. But he didn't look as irritated as he had previously. Maybe he'd overheard everything? Macro watched them go, then turned back to the fountain.

"You not going with them?" he asked.

DL shifted beside him and hugged her tail into her lap. "No."

"I thought I said I wanted to be alone."

She combed her claws through her tail, watching them vanish into her thick fur. "I don't think you really want to be alone. No one would after something like that." She paused. "No one should after something like that."

He clasped his paws together, not taking his eyes off the fountain. Clear water gushed from the horsea's mouth to gather into a pool beneath it. The soft splashing filled the garden in an almost tranquil and harmonious way.

"I mean, you've lost your home," DL went on. "Personally, I always thought of Wildcard Gamma as being more of a home, but Pulse City was… It was always a retreat. Somewhere to go to get off your ship."

"It was more than that, DL. I used to have an apartment there," Macro explained. "Sold it in favour of living on my ship. But still. That city was home."

She was silent, but he could feel her watching him. He leant back in his seat and sighed, raising a paw to his forehead.

"A lot's happened recently," he said. "It's hard to get my head around it all. Like… where did I go wrong? When did my life end up such a mess?"

"If you're talking about now, I don't think it is a mess," said DL softly. "You've just had some accidents trying to put things right. System's suffering because of Socket, not you."

He lowered his paw again and looked down at her. She was still clutching her tail, watching her fur part as she absently combed her claws through it. If she'd intended her words to have a soothing effect, it had worked. But recent events still gnawed at him, making him wonder what he could have done differently. Like if there was any way he could have prevented the attack on Pulse City? Should he have acted to prevent the other human being pulled into everything? Was the fight with the kartana possible to win? He took a deep breath to still his thoughts and closed his eyes, trying to focus

on the fountain, but all he could think about instead was the pachirisu at his side. She was innocent in all this. She didn't need to stick with him, yet she chose to. His paw sought out DL's, scooping it from her fluffy tail and bringing it to rest on his knee. Still encased gently in his, he brushed his thumb over her soft fur and leant his head back against the bench.

She scooted closer to him, her warm body pressing against his side. Her head fell to rest on his shoulder and she let her other paw rest on his arm. His stomach flipped up a flurry of bubbles, dominating the pain in his chest until he barely even noticed it. That's when another thought entered his head. Another 'what if?'. What if Jumper hadn't interrupted them earlier?

He looked down at her, catching a whiff of lavender from the fur between her ears. A scent he'd often wondered why he even bothered having on his ship, but on her it was perfect. Oh how he wanted to re-ignite that moment from earlier. He lifted his free paw towards her, but the image of Pulse City flashed in his mind in a bid to win the tug of war with his emotions. Instead, his paw joined the other around DL's and he nuzzled the soft fur between her ears, letting the lavender consume him and that memory with it. She looked up slowly until her nose brushed his, and he looked back into her chocolate eyes. Warm, inviting… he was desperate to get lost in them. To hold her close. To breathe her in. To forget about the disaster and the pain.

He pulled back slightly and closed his eyes. At some point her paw had found the long fur around his face, and he took hold if it and gently pried her free.

"Macro?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "My mind is a mess right now. I really don't want to hurt you."

"Then I won't let you."

There was no disappointment in her voice, and he could no longer see her face. She curled up into him again, nuzzling into his shoulder. He couldn't deny his feelings for her, but he didn't want to let his emotions get the better of him and lead him to do something he'd regret. He still had hold of her paw, small, easily nestled in his. He lifted it to his lips and brushed them against her soft fur. She shifted to look up at him, but he kept his eyes closed, dotting her small paw with slow, tiny kisses. After a moment he stopped and nuzzled it before he sank down in his seat, clutching her paw in his lap. She wound her claws between his and snuggled back into him with a small sigh. His strength was failing him again. He could easily fall asleep listening to the fountain, with DL huddled into him.

"You know, DL," he said slowly as he let his heavy eyes close. "After everything that's gone on… you're the one part of it all… I would never change."

…

Across from the small garden, behind the glass wall, Surge sat watching. Thanks to the angle of the horsea fountain, Macro couldn't see her, but she could see him clearly. Her cup of steaming cocoa was clutched in both paws, hovering just beneath her chin, almost forgotten about.

No one from Wildcard Gamma knew she was there. She'd followed their ship into Cyan City fully cloaked, slipping through the dome to hover behind it as it deposited its crew. She hadn't been sure she was going to stick around until she witnessed the fallen mawile being whisked off in an ambulance. With no idea what had happened to reduce him to such a state, she parked her tympole at the docks between Cyan City's less elaborate ships, leaving the cloak up. She'd had to re-jig her appearance slightly, removing her trademark bandana and waistcoat in favour of a small, brown dress and black neckerchief. Fortunately for her, Cyan City had its own share of normal types so no one batted an eyelid at her presence.

She'd been unsure how to approach Macro, instead lurking around the hospital's cafe as she tried to work up the courage to catch him or another member of Wildcard. Find out what exactly had happened. Maybe even apologise.

But the scene that had unfolded before her eyes left a gnawing feeling deep in her gut. A feeling that left her questioning her own sanity. Her claws fastened tightly around the porcelain mug and it trembled in her paws, spilling sticky cocoa onto the glass-topped table.

She'd been a fool. Risking everything for that mawile until she'd landed herself on Socket's 'most wanted' list.

She let the mug clatter onto its coaster and stood up, her chair screeching across the tiles. A few irritated glances were flashed her way from the closer tables and she gave those pokemon an apologetic nod before strutting, seething, from the cafe. She passed a lombre at the entrance, and he followed her with his eyes. It wasn't until she reached the square that she realised the walking lily pad was tailing her. There was every chance he just wanted to go to the square, so she ducked into an alley, stopping beside a set of bollards. The lombre was still following her. She leant back against one of the bollards, fixing him with a raised eyebrow.

"Problem?" she asked innocently.

The lombre's beak-like muzzle turned up into a smirk. "I recognise you. You're that chica, Surge, Socket wants turning in."

"Really?" Surge examined her claws. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Quit with the innocent act, chica," he scoffed. "I know you've been conspiring with that space pirate. Well, he might be protected here, but you ain't. So I'm gonna take you all calm-like to the governor's office and turn you in. That's a nice fifty thousand credits for old Midi here."

So the sneaky lombre wanted to make a quick credit, did he? Surge stifled a smirk of her own as an idea manifested in her mind. A way to get the lombre off her back and potentially get herself cleared from Socket's radar.

"I'd hardly say I conspired with him," she said.

"Ain't what I heard." Midi's muzzle creased and he flashed a sharp canine. "Apparently you gave him government information."

"Lies." She pivoted against the bollard to face him fully and folded her arms across her chest. "He hired me, I took the job to win his trust. I've been after that mawile for months."

Midi chuckled and fixed her with a look that turned her blood to ice. "Not exactly in the best place to apprehend him, are you? And given the state he's in, I'd say it would be pretty easy right now."

A soft laugh rocked her shoulders. "Well. You're not in the best place to apprehend either of us. I'm not a wanted 'mon anymore. I explained my case, and I've been given another chance."

"Eh?" A confused sneer tugged at his face.

"I have… oh, I dunno… two weeks to catch Hunter and turn him in before the authorities are back on my tail. So I'm lurking about here until I can catch him when he leaves."

"Say that much louder and you'll be locked up in our prison," he scoffed. "You ain't much good to me there."

"Like I said. I'm not much good to you anyway."

"That's a nice story, chica, but I ain't buying it. Socket doesn't give second chances."

"I admit my actions weren't completely innocent," said Surge. "But when I explained, at length, what I was actually doing, she let me go on that condition. For Hunter to be at her feet in no more than two

weeks. Dead or alive." She chuckled and fixed him with a playful smirk. "And I even get an extra bonus. Double the reward."

"Even if he's dead?"

"Yup."

"Pull the other one!"

Surge laughed and pulled her computer from her dress pocket. Fortunately she still had the old email Socket had sent her. He didn't see the date on it, she made sure of that. Socket's signature was all that was needed to convince him. She watched as his eyes almost bugged out of his head.

"You ain't lying!" he gasped.

"Nope." She popped her computer back into her dress pocket. "Now. I'm at odds here. Given I can't apprehend him, I'm going to need something that will prove to Socket I'm still on the case while cluing her into something she might find pretty interesting. You see, Hunter knows me. He knows I'm hunting him down. If he recognises me, I won't have a chance at catching him."

"What you telling me for?" he scoffed.

"Because if you help me, I'll give you a cut of my share. Say… ten percent?"

"Twenty."

"It's ten, or I walk away and do this without you."

The lombre met her eyes with a leer, but Surge wouldn't let it shake her. He scoffed and let his shoulders slump. "Fine."

"All right." Surge popped her computer back and nodded back towards the hospital. Its tall chopper landing point rose high above the lower buildings. Clean, white and as clear as day. "Hunter stole

something that belonged to Socket. Well, kidnapped would be the better term to use. A pachirisu."

"That little pachirisu belongs to the Mayor?! I ain't buying this, chica. What would Hunter want with a fluffy pachirisu?"

"Hostage," Surge said flatly.

Midi's face blanched.

"That little Loop is her daughter."

Midi's jaw dropped. "That's the kid she adopted?!"

"Exactly. Now. Your job in all this is to spy on him," she explained. "You get a photo of them together and bring it back to me. I want proof for Socket that her little pachirisu has gone renegade. I don't know if it's Stokholm Syndrome, but I'm under the impression there's something going on between them. Socket needs to know this."

"Let me get this straight," said Midi slowly. "You want me to take photos of a couple of pokemon being all lovey dovey?"

"Exactly."

"Can I tell you something?" He paused, meeting her eyes again. "I think you might be crazy."

"Really?" Surge folded her arms and leant back against the bollard. "How would you feel if someone kidnapped your kid or your wife, or even your niece, and then that poor innocent pokemon fell in love with her kidnapper?"

Midi snorted. "Well, since you put it like that. But it ain't gonna be very easy given he's in hospital. I can't very well waltz in there and start snapping."

"Take all the time you need. I doubt he'll be leaving this city any time soon."

The lombre looked hesitant as he tried to read the zigzagoon's expression.

"Look, you take this photo," said Surge slowly, "then ten thousand credits of my reward is yours."

That melted away any doubt on the water pokemon's face. She held out a flat, LCD screen camera to him and he took it with a flourish. "You got yourself a deal, chica."

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 58

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D I do read them and I enjoy knowing what you guys think. As things stand, I'm currently working on Chapter 73. It likely won't be long until I've finished writing this story.

Chapter Fifty Seven

Wave City was awash with chaos. Strange, blobby creatures drifted above the water, a trail of black mist following their jellyfish tentacles. Water pokemon stood on the shore, firing hydro pumps and water pulses at the invasive creatures. Somewhere deep below the water's surface, electricity rose to the top and spread out in a blanket of static, illuminating the night sky. Those creatures unfortunate enough to be too close received a nasty shock and their twitching, paralysed bodies vanished beneath the surf.

"What's going on down there?" Annie asked as she peered through the cockpit window at the commotion below.

"I dunno," said Trojan. "And I'm loathe to find out. I say we change our plans."

"We can't do that!" Zip whined. "We need to get some backup in our rebellion and the water types are our best option!"

"I'm sorry," Trojan scoffed. "But none of us are equipped to deal with these monsters, let alone you."

"They aren't monsters," said Poipole.

"What's that, Sticky?" Annie peered over her shoulder at the poipole in Web's lap.

"I said they aren't monsters," he repeated. "They're nihilego. Creatures from a region called Deep Sea."

"Never head of it." Annie turned to the rest of her crew. "You?"

Everyone else exchanged glances and shook their heads.

"Of course you haven't. It's not part of your world." Poipole let out a wheeze. "I'm starting to feel dizzy."

Web looked down at him with a start. "Oh… your atmosphere… we rushed off without even thinking!"

"Well, given all that mist they're spewin'," said Trojan, "if it's poison, he'll be all right. Right?"

Poipole gave a weak nod. "It is poison…"

"Well, I've got plenty of that," said Web. "But I can't very well flood this cabin."

"Take him to the cargo hold," said Annie. "Then spray him with it. We'll be fine up here."

"It ain't air tight, yanno," Trojan scoffed.

Annie shrugged. "Provided she doesn't fill the cargo hold with it, we should be fine."

"Easy for you to say," Trojan muttered. He looked up and fixed her with a sneer. "But what about your buddy Waveform, eh? He's a grass type."

"I'll be fine," Waveform said bluntly. "If it will keep Poipole alive, I'm backing Annie's point."

"Spoken like a true Number One." Annie grinned and gave him a playful punch in the shoulder, causing the decidueye to twitch with agitation. "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."

Everyone fell silent and stared at her. She tucked her arms behind her head, watching the battle below.

It was Trojan who finally broke the silence. "That don't even make sense in this scenario!"

Annie waved a hand towards the cargo bay door. "Time is of the essence. Take Sticky and spray him!"

Web scooped Poipole up and vanished through the hatch into the cargo bay. It fell back into place in a manner Annie chose to decide was not an angry slam.

"So what are we going to do?" Zip asked. "How are we going to get down there?"

"That's easy, little fish," said Annie. "We land."

"Where?" Trojan scoffed, waving a paw at the battle. "The city is riddled with this… what did that runt call them? Nil Leggy or something?"

"I believe he said 'nihilego'." Annie scratched her chin in thought. "The name rings a bell for some reason."

All eyes were on her again as she wracked her mind. Where had she heard of these creatures before? She watched them curiously, drifting like little, ghostly girls in the air. A torrent of water fell shy of the ship as it struck one of them, only for the creature to retaliate back with a beam of shining stones. They didn't reach their target, instead peppering the ocean and creating a spray of colour. Along with the electricity sparking over the water and the vibrant lights from the city, it was like a laser light show, awakening the night in a sparkling song and dance.

"You're going to tell us you're from their world, aren't you?" Waveform asked slowly.

"Nuh-uh." Annie shook her head. "You see, I did a lot of travellin' when I were in my own world. Although I didn't see much outside of four white walls. But they made me do a lot of readin'. Thought it

would calm my mind. I probably read its name somewhere, 'cos I sure don't recognise it physically."

"Hmm." Trojan pursed his lips and fixed her out of the corner of his eye. "Anythin' come to mind about how to fight them?"

"Nope."

"All right, guess we're skirtin' round 'em and landin' somewhere in the middle of the city." He brought the ship up in a sharp arc and a surprised squeal came from the floor below. "Let's just hope those things aren't infestin' the entire jackin' place, eh?"

As they drifted over the ocean, one of the nihilego let out a spray of tinkling reminiscent of laughter and took off after the pyukumyuku. Black mist trailed from its tentacles and it brought them up to fasten itself to the ship's hull. The lights flickered and the dashboard lit up briefly before the cabin was plunged into darkness. It swerved sharply to the right, facing the eerily glowing bodies of an ocean of nihilego.

"Erm…" Trojan stared at his paws fixed over the steering stick.

"What are you doing?!" Waveform roared. "Turn us away!"

"I didn't do nothin'!" Trojan barked back. "It did that itself!"

The cabin floor shook as someone struck the floor beneath repeatedly. Trojan cursed under his breath and brought his foot down on the floor in a fit of rage. His lips curled into a sneer and he fought with the steering stick, but instead the ship drifted closer to the nihilego. They raised their waiting tentacles in a mesmerising fashion, stretching them out towards the ship.

The hatch exploded open and Poipole re-entered the cabin, making a beeline for the door.

"Poipole, wait!" Web followed after him, catching a confused glance from Annie. "He won't listen to me…"

"I have to fight them!" he squeaked. "Or they'll take over the ship!"

"But you're too weak!" Web cried as he wrestled the door open.

"I'm immune to their poison attacks," he told her. "I'm you're only chance of you getting free from their parasitic hold."

"Parasite?" Trojan and Waveform spoke at the same time.

"They're controlling the ship?" Trojan stared, slack jawed, at the strange creatures.

Web stopped short of the door as Poipole rushed out into the ocean air. She turned back to the cockpit, watching the nihilego with horror.

"He's not going to stand a chance," she said. "It's too clean here."

"Let's just give him a shot," said Waveform. "If he starts to falter, we'll find a way to get him back. I'll fly out and grab him if I have to."

One of the closer nihilego lifted its tentacles, and they began to glow with an eerie light. Before it could unleash an attack, it found itself doused with thick, purple slime. The slime proved too heavy, and it dropped like a boulder into the ocean. The rest of the nihilego turned their attention to something above the ship. The entire ship lurched backwards and the long, stretchy innards out reached up, forming a giant flat hand. It swiped the air, causing Poipole to swerve to the side and enter their field of vision.

"Aww, now that just plain ain't fair!" said Annie. "They're tryin' to swat him out of the air like an over-sized bug!" She rose slightly in her seat and waved her fist at the nihilego. "Oi! That's our trick!"

The innards out swung around like a flailing arm, changing from a flat palm to a club to a fist. Poipole dodged each swing, turning to fire sticky goo from the needle-like appendage on his head. Many of his

shots fell short, but those that hit home sent the nihilego dropping like stunned flies. The pokemon beneath the ocean surface cottoned on to the creature's strategy, lighting the water up with electricity to engulf the fallen nihilego.

"Yeah! That's right!" Annie cheered. "Toast them! Toast them like marshmallows!"

One of the ocean dwellers rose to the surface, almost unidentifiable amid the chaos. It sent a bolt of electricity right up towards them, striking the ship and causing sparks to fly over the surface. Annie ducked and covered her head with her arms, but a small jolt coursed through her body. She heard grunts from her crew mates and a squeal of pain from Zip. She looked up with a start and twisted in her seat towards his water-filled bowl.

"You okay, little fish?" she asked.

He opened one eye and fought back his pained grimace with a weak smile. "I'm… I'm fine…"

She spun towards the window and waved her fist at the ocean. "Watch where you're aimin'! I didn't ask you to toast us, you fools!"

"They are watching where they're aiming," Waveform croaked. "They see us as a threat since our ship is trying to strike Poipole!"

Annie's jaw dropped slightly. "Ohh…"

Poipole dodged another swipe as one of the water pokemon threw a thunderbolt straight at the ship's weapon. It fizzled harmlessly on the gooey surface, doing nothing to stop its pursuit of Poipole. Another bolt struck the ship, this time causing sparks to fly from the dashboard's wires.

Trojan leapt back with a yelp and stuck his paw in his mouth. "We're gonna sink if this keeps up!"

The ship shuddered and the innards out flopped limply forward. A splash came from below and the ship hung there in the air harmlessly. Trojan grabbed his steering controls and the ship juddered as it drifted backwards.

"I can't call back the innards," he said. "Whatever they've done, they've fried it."

"But we're free, right?" Waveform asked. "Do we have any backup weapons to show we're not a threat?"

"Nope." Trojan dropped to the floor and opened up the dashboard to reveal its circuits. "I suggest you get onto the roof and start fighting the nihilego. That'll gain the army's trust."

The ship shook again and the scrafty cursed loudly as his head struck the inside of the dash.

Annie rose to her feet and turned to her crew. "He's right. We need to climb on up there and start firing our attacks. I suggest you two go first, since you have range to your advantage. As for you-" She turned to Zip and Web cut her off.

"You and Zip will stay in here," she said. "He's too young and you are not a pokemon at this present time."

Annie looked down at herself then met Web's eye. "What's your point?"

"You can't use attacks."

Annie folded her arms and closed her eyes, lifting her nose in the air. "I have you know I punched the Mayor lookin' like this."

"And I can fight!" Zip snapped. "I can use water pulse. Unlock my legs and I'll fight alongside you!"

Web sank slightly and let out a sigh. "Fine. Punch some jellyfish then. And keep a close eye on Zip. Make sure he doesn't tumble off

the ship or something."

The skuntank marched towards the door and tugged it open. Cold air immediately flooded the cockpit and she twisted her body through the door to climb up the crude ladder to the roof. Annie followed after her, sandwiched between the skuntank and Waveform. The latter had Zip clutched under one wing as he used his other to hoist himself up. Once they were on the roof, another tremor shook the ship.

"Whoa!" Annie flailed her arms as she teetered backwards.

Web span and grabbed her arm, tugging her back onto the roof. "Be careful!"

Annie dusted herself down and looked out at the ocean of nihilego. There looked to be a lot more from her new vantage point. Some were even drifting over the top of the ship, only to be shot down by Poipole's gunk shot.

Waveform set Zip down in the centre of the roof between two of the pyukumyuku's spines then turned and aimed one of his silver arrows into the fray. It fired off towards the nihilego with a twang, leaving behind a trail of purple stars. It struck one of the nihilego right in the centre of its gelatinous head, engulfing it in a cloud of purple. It sank towards the ocean into a wet, electrical embrace.

"Hey, look!" Annie pointed at the electric-firing water types. "They're turning their attention away from the ship!"

"I guess they've taken our point," said Waveform. "Now focus your own attention onto the nihilego."

Poipole shot between them, engulfing an enraged nihilego in sludge. It dropped, clipping the ship and leaving behind a sticky trail.

"Eww." Annie's lip curled with disgust. "That's gonna leave a stain…"

The small, purple creature zipped away from them to fire his sludge bomb into the chaos. Many of his attacks missed home, but those close enough found themselves struggling to stay airborne. Web joined him, firing sludge bombs of her own. Each one left the tip of her tail with the force of a canon ball. Zip stood beside her, launching water pulses from the opening in his bowl.

The nihilego retaliated, launching a barrage of sparkling rocks. They peppered Web and the ship, bouncing off like large hail stones. Web flinched and raised a paw to shield her face, then when she found a break in the attack she fought back with another sludge bomb.

All Annie could do was watch. She stood with her arms at her side, watching as the nihilego dodged attacks only to find themselves in the firing line of another. Their tentacles outstretched to try and claim the ship, or grab one of her crew. Tiny stones rained down around them, scuffing the pyukumyuku and tumbling into the water to strike the helpless water types.

Waveform nailed one of the aliens right in its flailing tentacle, spearing it with an arrow and sending the creature reeling back in pain. Tinkles and screeches filled the air, rising to a crescendo as the nihilego's attention was drawn from the city to the giant pyukumyuku.

Some of the water pokemon on the docks dived into the ocean, carrying smaller members on their backs. Those who braved to swim though the electrically charged waters were completely unfazed, throwing their heads back to fire at the nihilego at closer range. The ones being carried joined their own attacks, combining to create an even more powerful stream of water. It exploded beneath the nihilego, blowing several of them out of the air. Their bodies rained down, creating an almighty splash that pushed the water pokemon back. Electricity surged over the surface, combining with the spray to give those not immune a rather painful shower. But they shook it off and kept going, water gushing from their mouths with the power of a jet hose.

"Keep it coming, guys!" Annie called towards them.

She turned back to the nihilego just in time to catch one that had broken free of its assault. She raised her fist to sock it right between its 'eyes'. Her fist plunged through its flesh, vanishing into its soft insides. The nihilego merely stopped and for a second she was convinced it was staring at her. Grinning. Clearly she'd not hurt it. It raised its tentacles, an eerie glow emanating from the tips. One of them wrapped around her arm, dragging her further towards its body as though it wanted to consume her. A high squeal flooded through her head, followed by the rumble of a million voices. Her eyes widened as she looked back at her own face, hazed as if she was looking at herself through a sheet of purple crystal.

Water engulfed it, shattering the illusion and ending the voices. She staggered back from it and watched as the creature blew back from her towards Waveform's waiting arrow. Annie's arm was released from it with a soft plop, leaving a hole wide enough for the nihilego's life fluids to gush from. The creature fell, crashing onto the roof then sliding off towards the ocean. Annie looked up, clutching her slimy fist in her other hand. Zip skittered past her to launch a water pulse into the chaos. Waveform gave Annie a nod and turned back to the battle.

"That was a close call," he said. "I guess you can't exactly punch them."

"Aye." Annie shook her fist, sending slime onto the roof of her ship. "It was like punching jelly."

"You might be more use to Trojan," he said. "Get back inside."

Every nihilego diverted its attention from the city to the pyukumyuku. They drifted around the ship in a circle, waving their tentacles and firing out their sparkling rocks. The pokemon flinched back and Annie lifted her arms to block the attack. Seeing an opening, the aliens moved in, wrapping their targets in their tentacles and taking hold of the ship.

Waveform struggled against a nihilego, straining back as it tried to grab his head. The alien jolted and Waveform let out a sneer, staggering back as the creature fell bleeding onto the roof of the ship. He gave it a hefty kick and launched an arrow to free Web from the clutches of another.

The numbers were too great, and Annie and her crew found themselves back to back in the middle of the ship's decorative spines.

"I don't like what they do to your head," Web gasped. "All that chaos…"

"Then don't let them touch your head." Waveform fired an arrow right through the centre of one of the creatures, knocking it from the sky.

"I can't help but think we've overestimated our abilities." Web followed his attack with a sludge bomb. "We might very well die here."

"Then go down fighting," Waveform told her.

"Alright. You don't need to tell me twice." Annie shrugged and reached up, grabbing a flailing tentacle. She spun on the spot and launched the creature like a shot put right into one of its friends. The two crashed down onto the roof. But they shook themselves off and raced back with even more vigour.

"Oh great, you've angered it," said Waveform as he fired off another arrow.

It didn't hit home, however. It found itself buried beneath a nihilego and a pile of sludge. Poipole floated in its place before turning to shoot another nihilego down.

Water gushed up from the ocean, sparking with electricity. Two more nihilego found themselves knocked from the sky, only to meet a shocking demise in the charged ocean.

The ship shook again, but not due to electricity or attack. The long innards out retracted back into the ship, and the contraption turned so the mouth was facing the nihilego. The occupants of the roof could hear Trojan's voice above all the chaos, muffled only by the ship's tinny body.

"Take this, suckers!"

The innards out shot forward with the force of a bullet, punching one of the nihilego and sending it rocketing backwards like a snooker ball. It crashed into one of its allies, and small cracks shot across its body, leaking out gelatinous goop. Its ally fell unconscious towards the water while the assaulted nihilego tried to shake the attack off. It rushed forward with two others, only to be caught by a downward swatting palm. They struck the charged ocean like raining pebbles.

Annie threw her hands in the air and let out a euphoric 'woo!' The innards out struck left and right, doing more damage than their combined attacks. Nihilego began dropping like flies, their heavy bodies creating loud splashes in the ocean. Pokemon were blown back from the impact, and many of the water types decided to return to the shore, leaving the ship and Annie's crew to deal with the threat. Before long, the nihilego were in retreat, their numbers greatly reduced.

Annie watched them fly off over the golden ocean, her arms crossed over her chest. In the distance, the sun was rising, adding an orange hue to the electrically charged water. Her crew joined her side, their breaths coming in heavy bursts.

"Well," she said. "I think we saw them off. Good work, crew."

Web let out a loud puff of air. "I'd say. That was a workout and a half. I think I'm ready for some breakfast."

"And I helped too," said Zip. "Right?"

The goldeen looked from Annie's beaming face to Web's apologetic smile.

"You did great, little fish!" said Annie.

"Annie's right," Web agreed. "You've certainly shown you can put up a fight. We'll be calling on you again."

Zip fluttered his tail from side to side as he pushed up against the glass, a huge smile taking over his face. "I'll never let you down! You can count on me!"

Poipole shot from the air, hovering before Web. A sharp, musical wheeze came from his proboscis but his face looked very relaxed.

"The threat is gone," he said. "But I think they may return. They will want to avenge their fallen members, or look for survivors."

Annie raised an eyebrow at him. "What? Those things think about stuff like that?"

"Of course they do, they're sentient," said Poipole. "They knew to take over your ship, didn't they? To use it against me?"

Annie let out a thoughtful 'hmm' and looked out at the ocean and the nihilego's retreating forms. "Then just how much of a threat do they pose to this world?"

"A big one," said Poipole. "They don't belong here. They'll ruin this world to make it habitable for creatures like them. Like me."

He floated there, exchanging glances with each of them. Web shook her head sadly and led them back towards the ship.

"Oh, I've so many questions," she said. "Let's get to Wave City. See if we can find somewhere to get something to eat and talk all this over."

They climbed back into the ship to find Trojan sitting triumphantly at the helm, a huge grin on his face.

"Did you see that?" he said. "Sent 'em packin'!"

Web gave him a playful grin and flopped into her seat, exhausted. "Get us to the docks, you goof."

Waveform didn't take his seat. He stood beside Annie, watching the docks grow closer. Water pokemon were still gathered on it, their limbs flailing in the air, all eyes on the ship.

"Well, if we were expecting a hostile reception for riding around in a space pirate's ship," he said, "then I think we're going to be disappointed."

"What are you getting at?" asked Annie.

"What I'm saying is I wouldn't be surprised if Wave City offered us a badge of honour."

…

BackDoor sat atop one of Wave City's tallest buildings. A communications tower dedicated to gaming, news and entertainment. Well, it would have performed that job if its main antenna hadn't been broken by one of the tentacled Ultra Beasts.

A chuckle came from deep within him and he sat back on his paws, watching the Ultra Beasts drift away across the ocean. That pyukumyuku ship had given them a run for their money. They'd been greatly outnumbered, and the combined efforts of Wave City's aquatic army and the crude weapon of a shoddy-looking ship had taken them on. And that purple blob thing darting about… he didn't recognise that. But it wasn't mechanical. He could pick up no signal from it. It was definitely organic. Had it slipped through a dimension pocket without him realising? He found that hard to believe. Maybe it

was from one of the pockets he'd left open. Or Zero Day had been doing his job again.

He needed to put an end to Zero Day. They were ruining all his fun.

The hoopa rose from the roof and looked over the city. Its inhabitants were waiting eagerly for that ship. He could hear their cheers. Their obnoxious cheers. Beating back his wonderful Ultra Beasts didn't warrant such celebrations.

He turned from Wave City and zipped over the rooftops. He needed another plan. He needed more of those Ultra Beasts.

A quick scan picked up another of their home worlds deep within Wave City. He started towards it, but then his mind reeled, filling with several new ideas at once.

No… he didn't need those tentacled beasts. What he needed was something new. A bigger toy to play with. He scanned again, picking up three different pockets but none of them were close. They were outside Wave City. The closest one was in the Backbone Mountains. Oh well. It was close enough. Maybe what he found there would be fast. Fast enough to trample Wave City to dust. He'd teach them never to ruin his fun again.

BackDoor changed his course, heading towards the mountains and his new toy.

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 59

A/N - Sorry for the delay. I've been busy and meant to update yesterday, but it kinda slipped my mind. This Saturday should have an update as per normal. Thanks again for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Fifty Eight

Anchor took a step back as Switch lunged at him with his beak, narrowly missing the talonflame's aerial ace. He spun on the spot, meeting Switch's golden eyes as another aerial ace was launched his way. Anchor brought up his fist and struck the talonflame with a feint attack right across the beak. Switch staggered backwards, blinking with surprise. He shook his head sharply and flashed Anchor a wink.

"Caught me off guard there," he said.

Anchor laughed and wiped his paw over his chest. "I do have a trick or two up my sleeve."

"You're supposed to be practising your fire fang," Switch reminded him. "Given that's what's meant to set off that Z-Crystal's special move, right?"

The talonflame nodded to Anchor's wrist. Fastened in a stone bangle was the sparkling, red Z-Crystal, catching the morning sun's rays. Switch was right. But they'd been fighting for over an hour, and he just wasn't getting anywhere with it. Hold it high, Solgaleo had said, and it would turn his fire fang into inferno overdrive.

"Should we really be doing this?" DL's voice drew their attention to the bench she was sitting on. "I mean, Macro isn't here. We should really be practising these moves together."

"My answer is the same as it was an hour ago," said Anchor. "Macro can't be here right now and we need to be practising, otherwise we'll end up unprepared."

"But the doctor said he'll be fit to go home in a couple of days," she said. "Can't we at least wait?"

"I believe his words were 'he'll be fit to go back home to his own bed'," said Anchor. "He'll need the all clear to be able to fight again. That could easily be another week. I doubt BackDoor will conveniently wait that long. Look what happened to Pulse City! Some of us are gonna need to be able to fight while he catches up."

"Anchor's right, DL. You saw what happened to him," said Switch. "If some of us know to activate these moves, it might prevent the same thing from happening again. And it might speed up his learning process and get the ball rolling much faster." He finished his sentence with a wink. "You in?"

DL stared at them for a moment then gave a curt nod. She slipped from her seat and adjusted the bangle around her right wrist.

"What about Matrix and Cookie?" she asked. "They should be here too."

Anchor grunted and turned back to the talonflame. "You wanna drag Matrix from Assassin Strike, be my guest."

DL considered this for a moment then shrugged it off and turned towards Switch. The talonflame shifted uneasily and cast a cautious eye at her.

"You don't plan to practice your move on me, do you?" He gave a nervous laugh.

"Well, erm…" She looked from Switch to Anchor and twirled the bangle around her wrist with her other paw. "Either, really. I don't mind."

"Okay, well." Switch cleared his throat. "I'm not too sure how I feel about being struck with a powerful electric move. You might end up roasting me alive."

"He has a point," said Anchor. "I'll be your punching bag. Let's get you warmed up first. Hit me with your best shot."

The granbull took a step back and spread his arms wide. DL moved around so she was facing him and fixed her eyes on his. He could see the determination in her eyes. A real look of confidence. He'd never seen her try to fight or use her attacks even once. But this was no meek pokemon staring at him. He grinned widely and thumped himself twice in the chest.

"Come on," he said. "Throw a discharge at me."

DL closed her eyes and pursed her lips, an expression reminiscent of a pichu trying to control its electricity. Then her ears stood upright and her eyes snapped back open, all that previous confidence lost in an instant.

"I… I don't know how!" she said.

"Eh?" Anchor inclined his head on one side then rubbed the back of his mohawk. "Erm… do you know any attacks? Spark? Thundershock? Tackle?"

Her eyes went distant and she stared off into space, but he knew he was checking her database. Then she shook her head slowly and looked back at him.

"No," she said. "I've no recollection of ever using any attacks."

"Really?" Anchor stared back at her dumbfounded. "Nothing at all? Why not try again? Just a small jolt or something?"

DL closed her eyes again and tensed up her entire body until her fur was on end. Both paws were clasped into fists so tight Anchor feared

she might puncture her flesh with her claws. Then she let out a frustrated growl and looked back up at him.

"I just can't do it!" A lone tear trickled down her cheek and she flopped onto her bottom. "Why? I… I guess it's not in any of the memories I have."

Anchor exchanged glances with Switch, and the pair of them moved over to the pachirisu's side. Anchor sat down beside her and placed a paw on her shoulder.

"It kinda makes sense," he said. "Those memories of yours only go back as far as… well, your early teen years. Right?"

DL nodded bitterly. "But you'd think there'd be something? Pokemon are learning new moves well into their teen years. It's how you get stronger."

"Yes, but you need something to go off," Anchor explained. "I don't know much about electric types, but moves get stronger, right? Little pokemon scratch, then later they'll really slash with their claws. Tackle becomes take down. Headbutt into head smash. That kinda thing. I guess the same works with electricity."

"It actually makes more sense with electricity," said Switch. "The current gets stronger, just like the flame in a fire type."

Anchor let out a single laugh. "Well, you would know. Unlike you and DL here, I don't use special type moves. I'm more of a brawler."

"You both made clear points." DL gave them a weak smile. "Thank you. But this leaves me with a bit of a problem."

Both pokemon looked down at her silently, waiting for her to elaborate. She grabbed her tail in her paws, brushing her fur absently as she gazed down at it. She took in a steady breath and glanced them out of the corner of her eye.

"I'm not sure I want any more of my memories," she said. "That last disk really hurt me. Bringing all that back, knowing what Socket did to me… what else happened to me? My parents, my home? How did I end up in an orphanage? What exactly happened to me that landed me in that wicked pokemon's clutches?"

Anchor scratched his mohawk again and stared off at the lake. "I… I dunno. But if you want to use your Z-Move then you need to be able to attack."

"Can't I just learn again?" she asked. "From scratch, like a hatchling?"

"You could," Anchor said hesitantly. "But it would take a really long time, and that's time we don't have."

She looked up at Switch, eyes pleading. "How long did it take you to learn? You're not even really a pokemon, so you have to have learnt at some point, right?"

He shifted uneasily and cleared his throat. "It took me months just to get the basics down to a fine art, never mind building on them. But the ability was always there, within me. It's a case of unlocking it."

"Yeh, but like you said, it took you months," said Anchor. "We don't have months, let alone enough time for her to learn discharge!"

Switch fell silent and huddled into himself, fluffing out his feathers.

Anchor sighed and ran a paw down his face. What a predicament. He hadn't expected any setbacks like this.

"Then I guess I don't have a choice, do I?" DL's voice was quiet, almost a whisper.

"You do," said Anchor. "Two choices. You either get your remaining memories back so you can use your discharge attack, and therefore

your Z-Move. Or you leave it and don't…" He threw his paws into the air. "Don't help us."

DL flinched and squeezed her tail, her paws vanishing into the fur completely. "Then I was right. I don't have a choice. I'm to help you, and I want to help you. So I need to get my memories."

"Hey, don't be too hasty," said Anchor. "You made it clear you don't want them. Think things over first."

She nodded curtly and rose to her feet. As she turned to walk away, Switch lifted his head.

"Hey," he said. "There are other ways you can help, you know. You need to put yourself first here."

She froze and glanced back at him over her shoulder. "You sound just like Macro. 'Look out for number one'."

"Well, whereas I can find that mawile rather selfish," said Switch flatly, "he might actually be right here."

"Part of me thinks you're wrong." DL turned away and sighed. "I don't know. Give me time to think about it."

Anchor sat back on his paws as he watched her walk away, head down, arms limp at her side, and her usually perky tail trailing along the ground.

…

Annie stretched languidly as she strolled down the sunlit streets of Wave City. Not a toxic cloud in sight. Clean, crisp, ocean air filled her sinuses and she let out a satisfied sigh.

Despite the warm and thankful welcome the human and her team had received, Wave City's inhabitants still seemed rather jittery. The local pokemon cast her nervous glances, but none of them fled. News of a human had spread across System, not that Annie really

cared. Somehow, she'd managed to take her medicine before her archeops form took hold, securing her another day at her full height on steady, human legs with steady, human hands, rather than scurrying around as a clumsy prehistoric bird.

Not that she minded the archeops. It was just nice to be herself for a little while longer.

All of her team appreciated the clean air. Trojan leant against a shop wall with his arms crossed and he raised an eyebrow at her. The irony of clean air lay between his claws in the form of a cigarette, a clear sign Web was still back at their hotel. Most likely with Zip and Poipole. The purple creature was the only one not happy with the clean air. He'd taken to hiding in the skuntank's tail in a desperate bid to inhale toxins.

Annie paused beside the scrafty and glanced from his face to the smoldering ashes dropping to the floor. "Any joy?"

Trojan snorted and flicked the remains of his cigarette into the drain. "You mean making Poipole a bowl like Zip's? Fat chance. I told you that last night."

Annie shrugged and stuffed her hands into her pocket, glancing over at the docks. Keeping the little creature with them was looking to be almost impossible.

"We're probably gonna have to release him into the outskirts," Trojan explained. "Although I ain't too happy about it. He really saved our hides in that fight last night."

"Aye. Those creatures could have overwhelmed us." Annie rubbed the back of her head and sighed. "Well. Whatever's best."

"You're bein' rather dismissive about it." Trojan narrowed his eyes at her. "Way I see it is you two are exactly alike."

"Hey! I ain't no purple slimy blob!"

"I ain't sayin' you are!" Trojan growled. He let out a sigh and pushed back his head fin. "What I'm sayin' is you're two lost aliens. Stuck in a world where you don't belong. You both need understandin' types, not to be left to your own devices. That Poipole needs friends. We let him loose in the outskirts, what's gonna happen to him? You think he's gonna just buddy up with some other gang?"

Annie shifted her weight to one leg and stared off at the ocean. She pursed her lips together, searching for the right response. But Trojan went on.

"He also knows what those creatures are," he explained. "Knows how to fight 'em. He's a valuable ally. I don't know about you, but I don't really wanna discard him like that. We need to find a way to keep him healthy."

"He seemed quite comfortable in Web's tail," said Annie.

"Comfy or not, it ain't a permanent solution."

She scratched her head and frowned at the skyline. Something Trojan had said had really grated on her. She cast the scrafty a sideways glance and stuffed her hands back into her pockets.

"You really think I don't belong here?" she asked.

"You ain't a pokemon, are you?" he grunted.

"I kind of am."

"Yeh. An extinct one." He reached into his baggy skin and pulled out a cigarette pack, frowned at it, then stuffed it back in place. He folded his arms again and raised an eyebrow at her. "I'm right, aren't I? I know I'm right. You wanna get home as much as Poipole does."

Annie frowned down at him and puffed air out of her nose. "I'm free here."

Trojan shrugged and turned his head to look back at the hotel. "You might feel free, but after a while it might start to feel like a prison. I know I wouldn't wanna be stuck in some alien world without my own kind to talk to."

"My own kind aren't very interesting. They force me to read books and watch videos, rather than mingle. And they talk about celery and people named Mark."

He let out a dry chuckle and waved her off with a paw. "Then by all means, go and mingle. I'm just sayin' you might change your mind after a while."

Annie shifted her weight again and turned away from the Scrafty to look back at the ocean. She'd become oblivious of the other pokemon during their chat, but now she could feel all their eyes on her again. She shrugged them off and marched towards the docks, to her waiting ship. The pyukumyuku still looked rather stained, its glossy black hull marred with neon purple streaks.

Waveform sat beside it, his feet hanging over the docks. They were high enough not to touch the ocean, but the spray dampened his feathers and left little drops on his scales. His quiver lay beside him with his silver arrows scattered around, and he held one in his wing paw while his other polished it with a dirty rag. She slumped down beside him, letting her own feet hang over the edge. Immediately the surf peppered her worn boots with water droplets and soaked into her trousers.

"I always thought decidueye use their feathers as arrows," she said. "That's what I read in a book, anyway."

"I prefer it this way," he said bluntly.

She leant back on her hands to stare out at the ocean, letting the repetitive, steady roar of the tide soothe her. But it did little to remove her recent conversation. Trojan's words still niggled at her. She

stifled a sigh and watched as the tide consumed a smooth rock blocking its path.

The decidueye looked up from his arrows and examined her face with his large eyes. "You look bothered."

"Hum." She inclined her head on one side, avoiding his gaze. "I guess I kinda am."

Waveform returned to polishing his arrows, running the rag along the shaft and over the deadly, pointed nib in an almost obsessive fashion. They sat in silence for a while, the only sounds being that of the ocean waves and the occasional squeak as he polished the arrow to a shine. Annie watched the water lap in towards the docks and feebly reach up towards them, narrowly missing as it retreated back into the surf to be followed by another wave. Frothy surf formed on the surface, some of which clung to the rocks far below the wooden supports. She thought she saw the first signs of wood rot where the damp had got to them. Like her, it wasn't meant to be there. Slowly eating away at the wood until, if left unchecked, the docks would plunge into the watery depths, dragging unsuspecting pokemon with it.

"I'd like to ask what the problem is," Waveform said, breaking the silence.

She looked up with a start, but didn't look at him, instead gazing off at the horizon. "I feel like there should be a 'but' at the end of that sentence."

He shrugged. "Well, I'll admit I am worried I won't get a straight answer."

She leant back on her hands and let out a bitter sigh. "I've just been told I don't belong here."

Waveform lowered his arrow and turned his head to look at her fully. She didn't meet his eye, but a frown creased his features, distorting

what little she could see of his beak.

"Who on earth told you that?" he asked. "Wasn't one of the water types, was it?"

"No, it was Trojan."

He let out a snort and returned to his arrows, discarding the one in his paw in exchange for another. "I'd take what he says with a pinch of salt."

"Oh, I dunno. It's left me feeling salty enough." She dipped the toe of her boot into the surf as it rose up again and flicked it, scattering water droplets as far as she could toss them. "Just like this ocean here."

"Why did he say that, exactly?" Waveform asked.

"Because I'm a human. Just like little Sticky, I don't belong in this world." She paused. "But unlike him, it's not killing me."

Waveform paused with the rag held over his arrow, then tossed it to his side. "You're from System's past, right?"

"That's what I'm led to believe. But all white-walled cells look alike to me. For all I know, the doctors could have been in cosplay."

"But you turn into a pokemon."

"Yes, I've not always done that." She nodded dramatically. "So I guess that answers your question, yes."

"Then in that case, they've tried to get humans home already."

She turned her head to look at him. "They succeeded, right?"

"That's what I'm led to believe." He shrugged, not meeting her gaze. "But evidence says they failed. Not all humans went back home. But… most pokemon don't want to believe that. They say it's a myth.

That the Fracture never happened, or if it did that it didn't happen the way the stories tell it."

"What, they don't have history books?"

"It was allegedly all destroyed." He picked his rag up again and absently polished his weapons. "But they can't destroy everything."

"So there's evidence?"

"There's blood."

Annie paused as a rather gruesome image filled her mind. She blinked a few times and stared at him, questioning. "What do you mean 'blood'?"

He let out a sigh and tossed his rag aside again, but with his arrow this time. It landed among the others with a small clatter that seemed to ring across the docks but it didn't draw any attention from the dock workers. He gave them a wary glance then pulled one of his legs up to his chest, letting his wing fall over his knee.

"I'm going to tell you something you can't repeat to anyone," he said quietly.

She shrugged and scratched her nose. "I probably won't remember anyway."

"Oh you will, because I want you to."

He glanced at the dock workers, then at Annie. When she only returned his stare, he tapped the floor beside him. She took the hint and scooted to his side.

He lowered his voice to a near whisper. "There's a group of pokemon out there who strongly believe they're descended from what humans remained in System. It used to be quite a large group, but it's dropped in size considerably over the last two hundred years."

"Really? Pull the other one," she scoffed. "Humans can't breed with pokemon."

"They can if they have pokemon bodies," he retorted. "When you're an archeops you have the biology of one, right?"

She blinked slowly. "What do you mean?"

He let out a flustered sigh and shook his head. "I'm starting to think this is pointless."

"No, no. Wait." Annie scratched her chin and looked up at the sky. "So I get feathers. And… my sense of smell gets stronger. Not that good a thing in Spool City, I gotta say."

"So you get my point." He ran a paw over his armoured beak and fixed his eyes on the horizon. "Anyway. Like I said. Since this group believes they're descended from humans, then you belong in System like any of them do. Just like their ancestors who chose to stay here. The only difference is, you're pure blood. To them, you're gold."

"So you think they'd want me in their group? There's somewhere I can belong?"

"Hah! I'm making it my personal duty you never fall into their paws."

A frown creased her features. "Why?"

"Like I said. You're gold." He gave her a glance out of the corner of his eye. "You like being free, don't you? If they got hold of you, you'd end up trapped in their circle. There are a lot of pokemon in that group who want to make their blood as pure as possible. To try and regain what they deem a 'lost breed'." He paused as he took in her look of confusion. "There's been a hammer dropped on this group. They're not bad pokemon, but they've become rabid with this idea. I told you all the written evidence had been destroyed. It had been destroyed years ago by those who were 'anti human'. Well… 'anti

myth'. Since this group had proven there was something different with their blood, the authorities wanted to disband them. Many were locked up for 'disturbing the peace', but like I said. You can't destroy blood. The anti-murder laws meant that nothing could be done about them. They'd not done anything that warranted being put to death, so their lines continued. Albeit in a very small sense. The only ones left are fanatics."

"And how do you know about them?" Annie asked. "If they're so small."

"My great grandfather was amongst them," Waveform explained. "Strongly believed his was of human decent. Roped my grandfather into it and wanted him to marry into the circle to continue on the genes. But he didn't. My mother, however. She went with my grandfather into the circle and found her place there."

"You make it sound like some sort of cult."

"That's what I thought it was, if I'm honest." He paused and ran his feathers over his knee. "I went with her a couple of times, but I wasn't sure I believed any of it. They were just a bunch of crazy fanatics in my eyes, spouting nonsense." He paused again and glanced Annie out of the corner of his eye. "Then you came along."

She blinked a few times as she tried to take it all in, putting the pieces together like an elaborate jigsaw with no image to guide by. Then she lifted a hand and pointed a finger at the decidueye's chest.

"So let me get this straight," she said slowly. "You're telling me… that you are part human?"

"Allegedly."

"And there's a group of pokemon out there who are also part human?"

"Exactly."

She rolled her eyes and turned to fall back on her hands. "Whoa, what kinda crazy world did I fall into?"

Waveform let out a long groan. "What I told you was meant to make you feel like you belong."

"But it's fact, right?" she asked. "Not some tall tale?"

"Of course it's fact."

"And are you gonna take me to this group? Let me see it with my own eyes?"

"I told you!" He rounded on her and grabbed her arm in his wing. "If I took you there, you'd never see the light of day again! They'd be fighting over you! A pure human might even break them. They'd be at each others throats!"

"Would they?" Annie folded her arms and gave him a pointed stare. "Or is it you doing the fighting? You just don't want to share the gold that landed in your lap."

A frown twisted his features and he staggered back onto one paw. "You seriously think that?"

"They've been looking for an answer, haven't they? And what, you're not gonna let them know they were right the whole time? I'd say you're the one being greedy."

"You moron," he gasped. "I'm trying to protect you! From crazed fanatics, from the mayor, and from nosey detectives! Even psychotic space pirates! And you have the nerve to think-"

"Hey, hear me out here." She raised a hand to silence him.

"No, I won't hear you out! I'm a bounty hunter. My job is to hunt down the next big target that will net me a fortune. Do you know how much I could get for you if I took you to the right buyer? A lot! I can't even

guess the zeroes! And where are you right now? That's right, you're free! Sat on the docks in a wealthy city, free as a bird!"

"Alright, I get it. But you need to understand where I'm coming from. You've basically just told me there's a jar of candy and you won't give it to me."

"What?"

"I'm not alone. There's kind-of-humans here."

"Yes, and you're talking to one." He retrieved his arrow and returned to polishing it.

"So that means if there's humans here, I don't need to go back, do I? I don't need the Time Onion to get me home, because technically I am home." She sat back on her hands again. "I can be free here."

He snorted. "Then I guess we've both learned something new. You've learned there's human descendants, and I've learned you don't trust me."

She swivelled to stare at him and inclined her head on one side. "Would you trust someone who won't introduce you to your own kind?"

He lowered his arrow and met her eyes. "Would you introduce Zip to sharks, just because they were another kind of fish?"

"Zip, huh?" She diverted her gaze to the sky in thought. "The little fish. I suppose… I wouldn't want to be thrown to the sharks either."

"That's exactly what I'd be doing to you if I took you there. You'll just have to trust me. Your family here aren't crazed part-humans. You belong with pokemon who care about you. Like Trojan and Webber."

He scooped up his arrows into his quiver and rose to his feet, tossing it over his left shoulder. She had to crane her neck back to look up at him.

"Not includin' yourself in that little list?" she asked.

He turned on his heel to return to the city, not even glancing back at her. "There's no need to include myself. You can trust the pokemon I trust. That's all you need to know."

She watched as he strolled away into the city, shedding two long green feathers as he left. One of them drifted over to her and she scooped it up without thinking. A few of the delicate barbs broke away under her fingers, and she trailed one over them delicately to try and neaten them back out.

Dry and brittle. She'd always expected them to be soft.

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 60

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Fifty Nine

"It looks like you're ready to leave." The azumarill flicked through her digital Clip Board as she read over Macro's notes. "The doctor has given you a clean bill of health."

"Oh, finally. Some good news." The mawile tried to resist grimacing as he pushed himself up against his pillow. 'Clean bill of health' clearly didn't mean 'no pain whatsoever'. Although it was significantly better than it had been two days ago. "So when do I leave?"

The nurse raised an eyebrow at his eager tone. "You can leave today. But not until I give you the doctor's guidelines."

He sighed and flopped back against the headboard, waving her on with a paw.

"He says you're to take it easy for a few days," she said, returning to the screen. "Rest, don't work. Do very little exercise outside of walking, and don't try to lift anything. Practice your breathing exercises every morning, and take pain killers when you need to. He seems optimistic that you won't really need them in a couple of days."

Macro stifled a scoff at that and rubbed his ribs beneath his duvet.

"You're to pop back in for a checkup in seven days." She looked up to lock eyes with him. Warm but as hard as rock. Like a mother scolding a hatchling. "Jumper will be on your back about that, as will your crew. The doctor has warned me how stubborn you can be."

"Seven days. Check up. Gotcha." He tossed the duvet aside and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. "And believe me, ma'am, I

won't be lifting anything heavier than a dinner plate."

"All right. Well, I can see you're already confident I'm going to tell you you're good to go."

He paused as he reached for his scarf and goggles to glance the nurse over his shoulder, but she wasn't looking at him. "I am good to go, right?"

"Of course." She snapped the cover over her Clip Board and looked up at him with a forced smile. "See you in seven days."

She left the room before he could, letting the door swing shut behind her. Macro let out a flustered breath and tossed his scarf over his shoulders, followed quickly by his goggles. After not wearing them for a few days, they felt a little alien and he jigged them about a bit until they felt comfortable in front of his horn. As he left the room, DL almost collided with him in the doorway.

"Oh!" She took a step back, her eyes widening momentarily. A warm smile spread across her face and she looked him up and down before meeting his eyes. "I see you're ready to leave."

"I was ready days ago, they just wouldn't let me." He fell into place beside her and turned down the corridor towards the stairs.

"They wouldn't let you because you were critically wounded," she said flatly. "But I can understand. I wouldn't want to be cooped up in here either."

"Well, it's a lesson well learned to not be reckless." He glanced her out of the corner of his eye. "Is everyone else waiting somewhere?"

"Anchor and Switch are practising using those Z-Crystals," she explained. "Not that they're having much joy getting them to work. I told them I'd collect you and we'd meet them for dinner later on. Matrix is having lunch in a gaming cafe, but he said he'll join us later.

He also had breakfast there, too. In fact, he's barely left since we got here. He's attracted quite the fan base."

Macro tutted. "Sounds like Matrix. I wouldn't be surprised if he doesn't even know what day it is. Don't expect him to show up at dinner."

"Really?" A look of concern crossed her features. "I told him you were getting out today and he said he'd buzz on over with some breakfast. I'm guessing he's not been?"

"Nope. I had to have porridge again." Macro stretched, flinching as his ribs twinged. "Gah, I can't wait to have Cookie's pancakes."

DL's lips curled up in a smile. "Cookie's really looking forward to making them for you."

Macro glanced the elevator as they passed, briefly considering their smooth journey. He shrugged them off and began descending the stairs, already adjusted to a smaller pokemon's height.

"Have you had lunch?" DL asked him.

"Nope. When I heard I might be getting out, I decided not to order one. I'm tired of hospital food. I wanna hit one of those fast food vendors."

"In that case, let's head to the market square," she suggested. "I spotted a few of them this morning. I think one of them does berry burgers."

"Oh good." He burst through the door into the lobby, taking some of the waiting pokemon by surprise. "Given this city is filled with water types, I'm gonna guess it's fairly safe they don't serve meat."

A poliwhirl let out a squeak of surprise and almost fell off her seat.

"I've not seen anywhere that might," said DL quietly, giving the tadpole pokemon an apologetic smile. She trotted to keep up with

the space pirate and grabbed the door as he held it for her. "Everything looks like it might be made from locally grown produce."

"That's a relief." He took in a breath of fresh air and stretched again, feeling much less sore. "Ahh, freedom. How I've missed thee."

DL took a deep breath as well then let out a sigh. "The air is nice here."

He looked down at her, letting his eyes linger on her for a moment before steering her from the hospital. "So… you said something about a burger vendor?"

She chuckled and took his arm, leading him down the street towards the square. "I believe it's near the end of the market. If it's still there, maybe we could take them to the lake? It was a little busy on my way over."

"I don't mind busy markets. I lived in Pulse City, after all."

The thought of his former home gnawed at him and he shook the thought away, letting the sunlight pouring through the dome clear the threat of a storm cloud from his mind. When he looked up again, he spotted the market bustling with pokemon. The last time he'd been in Cyan City the market had been closed. With so much activity it looked like a different place entirely.

As they strolled through the crowd, various voices and smells struck him at once. Children begging their parents for games or candied fruit, market sellers calling out their wares, the smell of frying fritters and chocolate fountains competing with savoury dishes. Colourful bodies zipped back and forth - hairy, scaly, feathery - brushing against him or skittering out of the way, providing obstacles to duck by. With his tender ribs, it was quite the chore to get through unscathed.

When DL came to a sudden stop, she steered him to the side out of the way of a pair of boisterous children on their way to a crepe van.

She gave him a warm smile and nodded behind her at a digital menu. Macro finally realised they'd made it.

A squat van perched beside the menu while a watchog manned a hot plate of sizzling burgers. The vendor promised a selection of delights, but lacked his favourite occa and nutpea burger. Each one had its own name, but one that stood out to him was The Sunscorched Burger. Chople and lansat dressed with moomoo cheese and a tamato relish. It promised to be the spiciest in System Sky. The customer before him moved aside and Macro eyed the menu once more.

Well… you only live once.

DL shuffled up beside him, drawing an affectionate smile from the watchog. "I'll have a Sunscorched Burger please."

The watchog jolted with surprise. "Wow. A sweet girl like you? I guess you like your spices."

Macro reached into his pouch and handed the watchog a ten credit bill. "Make that two. And a large mago juice. Please."

DL twitched her head around to smile at him. A smile that warmed him from the inside. He diverted his gaze to the market place, distracting himself with the hustle and bustle. His eyes fell on a small, round table not too far from the vendor and he nodded towards it.

"Fancy saving us a seat?" he asked.

DL nodded and moved past him to claim the empty table. She immediately picked up the plastic menu stand and read over it, mouthing the contents to herself. A clatter drew Macro's attention back to the vendor, and he spotted the large mago juice beside his arm, dripping condensation onto the counter. Whether the watchog was insinuating something or not, two straws lay at lopsided angles against the rim of the glass. The burgers followed, plonked down

onto a glossy black tray. Macro scooped everything up and carefully waddled over to the table. DL looked up immediately, her nose twitching as the steaming burger was placed in front of her.

He flopped down into the chair opposite her and picked up his burger, spilling relish onto the plate. "I think I'm looking forward to this more than any sane 'mon should."

Before DL could answer, he took a bite out of it akin to a half-starved tyranitar and an involuntary groan left his throat. The pachirisu chuckled and tucked into her own meal with much less vigour. Just like it had advertised, it was spicy. A pleasant heat unlike the unbearable curry he'd once encountered in Raster City. That thing could have melted a steelix's hide.

"It's good," she declared with her mouth full.

"Tell me about it. I might come back here for dinner." He glanced up at her, noting the relish smeared over her cheek. "So. Have you been training with Anchor and Switch?"

DL paused mid bite and licked her lips slowly, reaching for the mago juice. She looked thoughtful, diverting her gaze to the market place as she took a long sip through the straw. Finally she glanced at him and shook her head.

"Really?" Macro sat back in his seat and a huge glob of tamato fell from the bun and splattered onto his scarf. "Drat." He swiped it aside and licked the remains off his paw, the heat from the spices making his skin tingle. "Why not? You've got a new move to practice too, right?"

"Yeh." She lowered her burger back to her plate but didn't relinquish it. "I erm… I don't know how to use any attacks."

"Oh!" Macro almost dropped his burger, but managed to get it back onto his plate rather than down his front. "I hadn't… considered you wouldn't know any."

"I think I know them," she explained. "I just don't know how to use them. I guess they're on another memory disk."

He made a thoughtful noise and trailed a claw over his scar, staring at the skyscrapers behind her. "That's interesting. I assumed they'd just be instinct. You know… like biting and scratching."

"I guess they're learned behaviour." She took another bite of her burger.

"Then if you can't use them, I suppose we either have to get the other two disks or find a way to teach you how."

"It might be faster to get the disks." She shook her head and sighed. "After what happened last time… I wasn't sure I wanted the rest of those memories."

"You're speaking as though you've decided you want them."

"I feel I have no choice. I'm useless to you if I can't fight."

Macro's muzzle creased in a frown. "You're not useless. You've got a gun, right?"

"Yes but…" She dropped her burger and glanced around before lowering her voice. "But Solgaleo said we're to use the Z-Moves to fight BackDoor, right? He gave me one of those Z Crystals. That means I'm expected to use one."

He leant his head on his paw and sighed, absently rubbing under his eye. What were they to do then? He was expected to remain in Cyan City for another week. Retrieving DL's memory disks would only delay their duties, and he highly doubted the Ultra Beasts or BackDoor would wait for them. He flinched as his eye began to burn and he snatched his paw away.

"Okay…" he whimpered. His eye began to stream, leaving a cool trail over his cheek. "Don't touch the relish and then your eye."

He snatched up a napkin and held it to his face, looking back at DL with his free eye. The pachirisu chuckled and nudged the glass towards him. He picked it up and took a swig, but it only served to make his mouth burn more than it already had been. He let out a laugh of his own and picked his meal up again, keeping the napkin pressed to his face.

"Okay, it's hot," he said. "I'll give them props for that."

DL licked what was left of her vanished burger from her paws. "Shall I get us some ice cream? It might help cool you down."

"What?" He frowned again and removed the napkin. "Didn't you find it spicy?"

She shrugged and pushed the chair back as she stood up. "It was okay."

"You're kidding, right?" He turned his head to follow her as she made her way to the crepe van. "Do you have no taste buds? A bionic tongue?!"

She laughed and stuck her tongue out at him as she reached the small queue. Well it certainly didn't look bionic. He turned back to his burger and challenged himself to finish it. There was no sense in wasting good food, even if it did threaten to burn his mouth away. He caught the watchog's eye from the van, and the normal type laughed and shook his head before returning to his task of wiping down the counter. Macro thought he heard him say 'rookie'.

To distract himself, Macro pulled out his computer and loaded up the locations of DL's remaining memory disks. He'd somewhat committed them to memory, but he felt the need to prove himself wrong. As expected, the last two were in the two locations he never wished to step paw in. Botnet City and Meta City. He couldn't even decide which one was the easiest for him to face. One thing was for certain, he didn't want to go there before he felt ready to take on Socket's loyal army.

Once his burger was suitably demolished, he reached for his straw and supped up half of the mago juice. It didn't do much to soothe away the spices. DL appeared beside him and held a cheri and cream crepe before his nose. He took it from her and gave it a hearty lick. There. Spices neutralised.

He chuckled and stood up, scooping up the tray with his free paw. "Shall we head to the lake?"

"Definitely."

She took the tray from him and placed it on the top of the trash can. The watchog thanked them with a friendly wave which DL returned gladly. Macro gave him a more cautious one and followed the pachirisu out of the square.

It wasn't far to the lake. He spotted the berry bushes surrounding it and a couple of azurill running around them. A few feet away from the playing children was a small row of benches, each spaced enough apart to give their occupants a little privacy. He pulled himself up into an empty one and looked over at the two hatchlings. It left a hollow feeling in his gut as his mind went back to Lossy. Part of him hoped deep down Cyan City would get to the bottom of her missing children.

One of the azurill dived into the lake with a soft splash, all but their tail vanishing beneath the surface. The other one laughed and raced along the side of it as they tried to beat them to the other end.

"It's so peaceful here," said DL.

"Aye." Macro nibbled at his dessert. "Even more so to me now, after my first visit here. Be glad you didn't see that."

"I am." She paused as she licked melted cheri ice cream from her paw. "But some good came of it."

"What good? It was a war."

"Well… they got to see who you really are, for one thing." She glanced him out of the corner of her eye. "Rather than the reputation the media gives you."

"Some of that is self earned," he scoffed. "Not that I'm happy about it."

She took a bite of her crepe, leaving a streak of cheri on her nose. "You've changed a lot since I first met you. That's definitely a good thing."

"So you didn't like me when we first met?"

"I'm not saying that." She leant back in her seat and fixed her chocolate eyes on him. "Bad pokemon don't offer to help others. Saying you were keeping me just to get back at Socket… I don't think that was your main motive."

"To be honest, it was up until I realised you were a real flesh and blood pokemon."

"Exactly."

Macro stared down at his crepe and ran his free paw over his head. He let out a small sigh and looked over at the lake. "To be honest, DL… you've changed me a lot."

"Me?"

"Yeh." He paused, watching the ice cream melt down the side of his crepe. "You gave me someone to care about other than myself."

There was a small silence before she asked, "What about your crew?"

He shrugged. "To be honest, I'd never realised I actually care about them either. For years, I was just their captain. You know… Captain of a sky ship with a crew who's always got each other's backs, like any space pirate. The hunted Hunter, wanted all over System. I'd

never seen my crew as a family or anything. I guess you've changed that, too."

He could feel her watching him, but he couldn't look round at her. Ice cream dripped over his paws and peppered the floor with small, sticky pink puddles.

"I want to help you, DL," he said. "And if that means stepping paw in Botnet City to get your next memory disk, I'll do it. And if that won't help you use your electric attacks, then I'll march into Socket's mansion and get the other one." He paused and looked over at her, meeting her chocolate gaze. "But only if you want them."

"What I want?" Her crepe found itself folded back into its wrapping and placed beside her on the bench. "What I want is for everything to be normal… and to just stay here in this city. With you… and the rest of our friends."

He gave a bitter laugh and took a bite out of his rapidly melting ice cream. "I'm afraid life ain't that easy, sweetheart."

"Then I guess we just need to enjoy it while it lasts, don't we?"

Another splash came from the lake and he looked up at the azurill. Still playing, alternating with diving as far as they could beneath the water. Their life-guard tails preventing them from completely vanishing out of sight. Peaceful. Not a care in the world.

"Well, I do have seven days until I'm 'fit for work'," he said, forcing a smile. "I guess we could just… pretend aliens aren't taking over System?"

DL chuckled and leant back into the bench. "That's a rather dark way of putting it."

"I suppose we don't have to go as far as forgetting everything," he said. "The media won't let us anyway. But we could enjoy the peace and quiet for a while."

His ice cream had turned what was left of his crepe into a soggy mess. He considered giving it one last, desperate lick then shrugged it off, tossing it into the trash can beside them. It had left his paws feeling sticky, so he gave them a wipe on his scarf. It needed a wash anyway, still stained with tamato relish.

"Right, well," he said, stretching. "Maybe we should go and find Anchor and Switch?"

Before he could rise, DL's paw fastened around his wrist. "Erm…"

He looked down at her, but she avoided his gaze, pawing at her ear.

"I kind of claimed you for the day," she said.

His stomach did a flip and he found himself letting out a strangled, "Really?"

Her eyes snapped back to his, dragging him into their chocolatey depths. He sank back into his seat and adjusted his paw so he could take hold of hers. The way the sun reflected off her fur with highlights of silver and gold was mesmerising. Part of him wondered what she meant by 'claimed for the day' but he didn't want to ruin the suspense by asking. A smile tugged at his lips and he lifted a claw to wipe the cheri streak off her nose. Her tiny nose twitched at his touch, causing him to chuckle.

"I guess I don't have much choice then, do I?" he said, feigning resignation.

"No."

She scooted over to him and brushed her lips against his. He jolted slightly, his heart leaping in his chest and causing him to drop her paw. She snatched herself back, a soft blush dusting her cheeks beneath her white fur. Her eyes flitted away from him and she wound her paws together.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I thought that-"

He regathered himself and placed his paw on her cheek, gently moving her face back to his. Her eyes widened slightly but all anxiety melted away as he brushed the back of his claws over her jaw. He leant forward and placed a small kiss on her nose, then placed another one on her lips. He pulled back and gazed into her eyes again before letting out a soft sigh as he moved in to catch her in another kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck, melting into him, and he let himself forget about everything else. Relishing in the fact that for the first time in years he wasn't afraid to let himself care about someone else.

…

Wet footsteps dragged Surge's attention from the news report she'd been reading. She blinked away mental images of sparking aliens to focus on the pokemon walking towards her. Midi stopped beside her, dripping water onto the floor where it pooled around the legs of her little, round table. He dropped her camera onto it, encased in a waterproof ziplock bag. It splashed droplets of water around her coffee mug and the remains of a nanab berry cake.

"I got them," the lombre told her. "Took enough photos you could make them into an album."

Surge picked up the bag and removed the camera, oddly surprised it was still completely bone dry. She loaded up the photos and her stomach tightened into knots. Her muzzle stiffened and she forced a nonchalant attitude as she scrolled through what looked like the contents of some sappy romcom.

"Good enough for you?" Midi asked. She didn't look up at him, but she could almost hear the smile in his voice.

"Good enough for Socket," she said. "This should prove a thing or two to her."

"And secure you in her good books?" He folded his arms and frowned down at her. "'Cos I don't work for free, chica. I expect my side of the bargain whether you get your reward or not."

She pulled her computer from her pocket and began to wirelessly link it up to her camera. "Oh, you'll get your side of the bargain. I'll be surprised if Socket isn't happy to receive this new little bit of information. What else did you find out? Any idea where they're going?"

"He said something about getting her memories from Botnet City." Midi paused and inclined his head on one side. "Rather dubious. What's so special about that pachirisu, anyway?"

"That's classified." Surge didn't look up at him. Her claw slid over the photos, selecting as many as she could to attach to her email.

"Spill," Midi snorted. "I wanna know what I'm gettin' into."

"Should have thought of that before you agreed to help." She shot him a brief leer. "I've been told not to breathe a word to anyone, and that includes you."

"Fine. So… how do you think the Mayor's gonna react to these photos? He clearly ain't hurtin' her. Aren't you worried it'll backfire?"

"Not at all. Socket has the right to know her daughter is currently being wooed by some sleezy space pirate." Surge glanced up at him. "If you were her, how would you react to this information?"

"I don't need to be Socket to know how I'd react," he spat. "If some space pirate got his paws on my little girl I'd have him hung, drawn and quartered!"

Surge let out a bitter laugh and fixed him with a sly smile. "Then you understand."

Her claw hit the 'send' button, and she heard the familiar whoosh as her computer sent the email and its contents to Socket. It also took her confidence with it, but she hid that under a sip of her tepid coffee.

…

The entire mansion shuddered, sending Socket to her bottom. She fixed her eyes on the holoscreen and shrieked at Yobi's face.

"What are you doing?!" she demanded.

"Don't worry, it's normal," he said.

"Normal? We've never flown this thing before!"

"These engines are pretty old, you know," he explained. "It's to be expected. Lifting the entire mansion out of Meta City is gonna take some doing."

Socket cast a nervous glance to the window. Those electrical creatures were still sprawled over anything that still gave off electricity. The smog hung in the sky, thick and heavy and dark. Above them, it threatened to rain. Rain would bring down the smog, filling the very streets with toxins so potent her feet itched at the sheer thought of stepping in it. She was convinced there were even more of those creatures, scrambling around broken and splintered electric trees, and clinging to what remained of the buildings' lights and air filters.

Her own air filter was humming away safely behind her glass dome. The dome had become both a prison and a sanctuary. The creatures had tried to climb it, but their scraggly legs couldn't grip the smooth surface.

Now the entire thing trembled, attracting dozens of the aliens to her mansion. Their lanky bodies tried once again to climb it, with more persistence than they'd previously shown. Tweak filled the office with

jingling laughter as he watched them flailing in a desperate bid to access the precious electricity it promised.

She snatched her head around to Yobi. "Fine! Get it up. Then get in here and explain things to me. I'm done with talking to a holoscreen."

Deep down she hoped Yobi hadn't translated her desperate need for company. She gave another fearful glance to the creatures. Deep rivets had appeared in the ground outside the dome as the mansion shook itself free. Concrete sprayed up into the air as the entire building jerked to the side. Socket slid away from her desk, but it moved towards her with an alarming speed. She rolled to the side and watched as it crashed into the far wall, shattering the holoscreen emitter before Yobi could give her an answer.

"Drat!"

She pulled herself to her feet and rounded on Tweak. The chingling lay upside down against the wall, waving his tiny feet and giggling like a maniac.

"Tweak!" she spat. "Pull yourself together! This isn't a joke!"

His laughter stopped abruptly and he fixed his upside-down eyes on hers. "Oh, but it's just so funny. Like… the mansion is gonna fly. Just like them islands you claim never existed! And what's funnier? You're using their salvaged engines to do it!"

Socket balled her right paw into a fist. "I suggest you silence that mouth of yours before I do it for you!"

He stared up at her and opened his mouth in a wide smile, letting his tongue hang free. She growled and turned to her shattered holoscreen. Unsalvageable. Now she'd no idea what Yobi was up to. Whether or not the mansion could actually get them safely out of Meta City.

She looked back out of the window. One end of the mansion's faux garden had lifted cleanly out of the ground. The entire building still shuddered, although not as violently. The floor levelled out, sending her sprawling face first across the tiled floor. A scream of frustration left her throat and she kicked and punched the ground.

"I want things back to normal!" she shrieked.

The door flew open and a warm paw fastened over hers. It dragged her back to her feet and she turned to see Yobi's concerned face. She took a deep, steadying breath and folded her arms.

"So tell me," she began. "Is this little experiment of yours going to fail or not?"

"It's working fine." He nodded to the window and she turned to look through it.

The grounds were level, but she could see nothing of the streets. The aliens slid down the glass and clutched the edge of the grounds feebly before plummeting out of sight.

"As you can see, we're in the air," said Yobi.

Socket ventured to the window. The garden crumbled away to drop into the city miles below, leaving a hefty gap between the dome and the mansion. But there was no way the aliens could reach it now. The air filter hummed in overtime, but soon they would be above the smog.

Yobi joined her side and chuckled. "For being thousands of years old, those engines are working a treat."

"I still don't understand why we hadn't just installed new, trustworthy engines," she said. "Whatever my great, great grandfather was thinking, I'll never know."

"Well, let's face it." Yobi turned to her and folded his arms. "Look at System Sky. Those cities float, sure, but can they be steered? Do they move?"

Socket stared at him blankly. He was making a solid point, but doubt still gnawed at her.

"At least we know these engines were designed to move huge islands," he explained. "Islands bigger than this mansion. Sure, the controls are clunky. But given it was installed as a huge 'eject button', I doubt it was ever expected to actually be used. Given time I might have been able to modify it, but… there are no modern engines designed to actually fly an island."

Socket pursed her lips together and stared out of the window. Not an alien in sight. "So I guess we're just going to have to trust 'mythical' technology to get us through a promising gateway."

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter. At least we're safe."

A beep came from her desk and she moved over to it. Her small computer tablet lay against the wall, a narrow crack adorning its screen. She tutted and attempted to wipe it off to no avail before frowning at the name strewn across it.

"Surge," she growled. "What does she want?"

"Beggin' for her life, probably," said Tweak. At some point he'd hopped onto her desk.

She turned and leant against it as she brought up the email. The words 'I thought you might want to see this' were scrawled above a series of photos. Socket's eyes widened with each one. Macro and DL, wandering around a lush city. Eating together. And…

Her lips curled into a smile and she let out a dry laugh, before bursting into fits of laughter.

"Is something the matter, Madam Mayor?" Yobi's voice wavered with nerves and he took a wary step towards her.

"Oh no. It's perfect."

Tweak hopped up onto her shoulder and let out a long whistle. "Smooth isn't he?"

She picked the chingling up by his hairs and dropped him back onto her desk. Then she continued scrolling through the photos until she reached another two lines of text. The space pirate's next destination, along with a request from Surge that she was still available to help. Pathetic.

Yobi peered over her shoulder and his eyes widened like saucers. "So… little Loop got herself a pirate boyfriend?"

Socket resisted the urge to slap the raichu in the face with her computer. One crack was enough. "That and Surge begging for forgiveness. She seems to think this will sweeten me up. Hunter's next destination is Botnet City, looking for the next memory disk. Apparently they'll be heading there in a week. It looks like our little pirate has been injured." She let out another chuckle. "Botnet City… that's bold of him. Those electric types will skin him alive. By any chance do you know which disk that is?"

Yobi pulled out his own computer and pawed through its contents. "Its memories date back to her very young childhood."

"More recent ones?"

"No. They're here in your office."

"And where is Botnet's disk?" she asked.

"Botnet Town Hall, just like you asked."

"Arrange to have that disk exchanged with the one here," she said. "And change its location to Strobe Street Apartment, number forty eight. Tweak?"

The chingling looked up from his sprawled position among her pens. "Yes?"

"You're to exchange them. Today. Make sure it's not guarded, and evacuate that entire block until Hunter has the disk."

"Roger!" Tweak whisked the drawer open and rummaged through it for the disk.

"Today?!" Yobi gasped. "They'll be out of their homes for over a week!"

"Not necessarily," she said. "Knowing that little sneak, he could arrive there as early as tomorrow. Injured or not."

"Then where are you evacuating them to?" Yobi stuttered.

"Don't care. Just get them out of the way," said Socket. "No one is to touch a hair on that mawile."

A sinister smile crossed her face and Yobi looked up with a start. "M-Madam Mayor, what are you saying? You actually want her to have her memories? I might alert you to the consequences-"

Socket waved a paw at him. "Oh, she's beyond repair already." She flicked her computer off and held it to her chest. "Besides… these memories might prove to be quite useful."

"Useful?"

Socket chuckled, her eye darting to Tweak as he zipped out of her room in a beam of light.

"What about Hunter? He'd be a sitting ducklett! You don't want to take this opportunity-"

"No." A wicked grin split her face and she let out another chuckle, oblivious to Yobi taking two steps back towards her window. "There's more than one way to hurt him. And once he's wounded, he'll be easy prey."

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 61

A/N - Sorry for the delay. My Asperger's has been giving me a hard time this weekend. I actually worried I'd have to leave it until tomorrow, but I'm feeling a fair bit better now. Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows!

EDIT - I am SUCH a spanner! I had this submitted and didn't post it?! I'll get chapter Sixty One up on Monday. Argh… Del, you doof…

Chapter Sixty

Annie followed her crew into the large auditorium. Eyes trailed over her body, widening with shock and fascination. But any vocalisations were kept quiet, nothing more than hushed whispers. The blastoise led them to the front and motioned for them to sit down facing the audience. He turned to the podium and clapped his large paws together by the microphone, reminiscent of a thunderclap as it rang out from the speakers.

"Order!" he roared.

The audience fell into silence, all eyes on Annie and her crew.

"As you well know," the blastoise began, "this group of space pirates helped us to eliminate a large threat. A threat that had previously ransacked other cities. One that had grown in numbers! Now I know their captain might look funny. I know she's drawn many curious looks and scepticism, but they've been here almost a full day and no harm has befallen us. I feel it is only right that, rather than turn them in, we hear out exactly why they are here."

He turned to look over his shoulder and stood aside for Annie to approach the microphone. She frowned out at the audience then threw her arms in the air.

"Alright, yeh, I'm a human!" she said. "A shape shiftin' one from the past. A Time Archeops, if you will."

"I thought we were past that name," Trojan whispered to Waveform and Web.

The latter two merely shrugged and hushed the scrafty.

"When I first arrived in your time line," Annie went on, "I found myself in Mayor Socket's clutches. She wanted to stick me in some lab, but I ain't no lab experiment. So I escaped and found myself a crew. And I learned a little somethin'." She lent forwards over the podium. "Your world is a mess. Not only do crazy mayors try to run experiments on innocent, helpless individuals like myself, you actually eat each other?!"

A few yelps rang out from the audience, and she could see pokemon shaking their heads or cowering back in fear.

The blastoise placed a heavy paw on her shoulder and she met his narrowed eyes.

"Not in Wave City we don't," he rumbled. "You think we'd eat our own kind?"

"What about sharpedo?" Annie asked. "Carvannah?"

"Extinct," he said flatly. "At least in Wave City they are. Just 'cos you've got sharp teeth doesn't make you a meat eater."

She huffed and turned back to the audience, then lifted a hand to the blastoise. "See? Now my human world is a little different. Back there, pokemon do eat each other, but they ain't like you. You are more sentient, more aware of right and wrong. Not driven by instinct like they are. I mean, yeh, sure, human world pokemon are intelligent. At least… that's what I've read. They eat each other, they eat eggs, and I ain't gonna deny it. Humans eat pokemon too."

Gasps spread across the audience and a few pokemon threw enraged questions at Annie. She raised a hand to silence them, but not all of them calmed down. One individual fired an ice beam at her, but she strafed to the side, letting it spread over the back wall. Waveform let out a surprised hoot and swivelled his head around towards it.

"I ain't sayin' I eat pokemon. But I think, given humans were once in this world, we've discovered where this little problem came from. Humans probably missed meat. You were all desperate for food. So pokemon turned to the ocean, turning you lot into victims! I say that's wrong. That's like turnin' on your own family. Just 'cos you've got sharp teeth doesn't make you a meat eater! We should write that all over System!"

"Yay!" Zip cheered, drawing the audience's attention. Silence washed over the assembly as they finally spotted the goldeen.

"You heard it, little fish." Annie beckoned the goldeen forward. "Now. I found this little guy floundering wounded in a polluted street, desperately clinging to life and the hope he could make it back home. He opened my eyes to this corrupted world. Why… oh why… are y'all eatin' one another? You know what we call that back in the human world? Cannibalism! I know y'all are different sub species, but y'all are sentient. All the same inside."

"She's right!" Zip clattered towards the podium, standing beside it so the audience could see him. "I know I can't walk on land. I've had this device kindly made so I can help Annie and my friends make their point. But I can see pokemon here who also can't walk on land." He looked over at a small pool at the front of the hall, diverted in from the ocean. Hundreds of eyes peered back at him. "We shouldn't need to live in fear. Pokemon shouldn't be fishing us up as a cheap and easy food source."

Mutters came from the pool as the pokemon nodded in agreement.

"I know System was desperate once," Zip went on. "I know we can't grow fruit trees or vegetables on System Ground anymore. But turning to us for meat just because we 'couldn't help in other ways'? We're not useless! I saw what you all did to stop those nihilego! We're every bit a part of System as any other pokemon, and we shouldn't be persecuted just because we don't have legs!"

Cheers came from the audience, particularly the pool. Small fish leapt into the air, splashing and smacking the water with their tails and fins.

"Exactly, little fish!" Annie placed a hand on the rim of his bowl and beamed at him before turning back to the audience. "So what are y'all waitin' around for? I say confront the mayor! Make her notice you are more than just meat!"

"Actually." The blastoise placed a paw on her shoulder again and steered her back from the podium, meeting her gaze with a steely glare. "You don't need to do that. You even seen the news?"

"Huh?"

Annie found the sea turtle's computer thrust into her hand. She stared down at it and her eyes almost bulged out of her head. A grin split her face and she twirled back to the audience.

"Oh this is just perfect! Can we get this up on the big screen, please?"

"No," said the blastoise flatly.

It was too late. Waveform plugged his own computer into the projector, bringing up the front page of Meta City News. A huge, detailed photo of the mayor's mansion floating miles above the city, encased in a perspex dome, contrasted a smaller photo of the city itself being ransacked by aliens and toxic smog. A few of the water pokemon screamed, and Annie heard something crumple to the floor with a thud. Someone had clearly fainted.

Annie waved a hand towards the photo. "This is your mayor! Bailing on the very pokemon she's meant to look after, leaving them to the mercy of… of…" She squinted at the photo. "I dunno. Aliens. And poison."

Mutters came from the audience as they pulled out their own computers.

"So I say one thing," Annie went on. "Rebellion! Who wants a mayor like this? Throw her off her high horse! Get shut of this careless, wicked gothitelle and take a pokemon like Zip as your mayor!"

Zip almost fell off his mechanical feet as Annie ushered him forwards. The audience cheered and rose to their feet. A few of them started chanting Zip's name, ushering the others on until hundreds were shouting it. A deep voice called from near the front 'Down with the mayor!', filling the auditorium with another chant. Claps and splashes erupted like thunder.

"Me?" zip squeaked, his face turning crimson.

"Enough!" The blastoise's voice was barely heard over the chaos in the auditorium. He pulled Annie away from the podium and frowned down at her. "You come along here raving about starting a jackin' war?"

Annie raised a finger to correct him. "Rebellion."

"It's the same jackin' thing!" Spittle flew from his teeth and peppered her face. "How do you think System is gonna respond to a speech like that?"

"I dunno. But surely water types outnumber the rest? I mean half the world is water."

"It doesn't matter!" He released her, pushing her back into Waveform's waiting wings. "I need you lot out of this city. I can't thank you enough for helping us, but I can't have you around, risking

starting a war! The water types are already at odds with the fire and grass types. You want to literally throw us into the mincer?"

"You sound scared," said Annie.

"Of course I'm scared!" he roared. "At the moment, they don't eat any water pokemon that have legs!" He waved his limbs. "An uproar might upgrade the menu!"

"So it's okay to eat water types so long as it's just the fish?" asked Zip.

"Of course it ain't okay," said the blastoise. "But we can't exactly do anythin' about it."

Annie looked back at the audience. The smiles on the water types' faces. The jubilation from the pool. She turned back to the blastoise and frowned.

"That's where you're wrong." With that, she turned to steer Zip away towards the emergency door.

The blastoise followed them but he didn't leave the auditorium. Annie gave one last glance back at him. His expression was unreadable.

"Did we fail?" Zip asked quietly.

"I wouldn't say so," said Annie. "I'd say we succeeded."

"How did you get that from what just happened?" Trojan spat.

"Easy." She aimed a grin at the scrafty. "We sowed a little hope."

He raised an eyebrow and let out a confused 'eh?'

"The water types have been gifted a voice." She tucked her arms behind her head and marched towards the docked pyukumyuku. "All they gotta do now is use it."

"And what about us?" Web asked. "What's next in your big plan?"

"Oh that's easy." Annie grinned from ear to ear. "We're gonna shoot down a flying mansion."

…

Tracer thought his fur would never stop standing on end.

He read over the Meta City News article for the third time, hoping that in some way he'd managed to misunderstand it. But there it was, clear as day. A photo to back up the propaganda infested article. Socket's mansion had risen into the sky, abandoning her home city to the fate of aliens. He'd be inclined to think it were a misunderstanding were there any evidence whatsoever that her army was trying to rid the city of the invasion.

But first it was the jellyfish, ransacking cities. More cities followed at the tentacles of a whole host of jellyfish. Pulse City had been reduced to rubble thanks to the onslaught of a seed-bombing cannon. Now there was something he could only describe as 'live wires' tearing down Meta City.

He lowered his computer and ran a paw over his large ears. "What's happening to System, Widget?"

The eevee wagged his tail, and not in the comical, jovial way that Tracer was familiar with. It was more of a nervous tail-thump.

"I don't know," he said. "But I gotta say, I only enjoy these scenarios on a big screen. Living one?" He lifted a paw and swiped it to the side. "Whole different story."

"Aye." N0ize turned around in his captain's seat and fixed them with a grin. "I'd describe it more like a bad dream. Can't say I've ever found myself without a home to retreat to. Right, Cyph3r?"

The magmortar shrugged his shoulders, keeping his eyes on System Sky.

N0ize continued to stare at Tracer, pushing his fur even more on end. "You all right, Fuzz? You're startin' to look a lot like an alarmed quilfish."

"I'm fine." Tracer looked back down at his computer but N0ize's grin was emblazoned in his mind. "I'm sorry you've lost your home."

"Ah, forget about it." N0ize exploded with raucous laughter. "We've got bigger fish to fry. Still tailin' that human you're so fixated with."

"How are you getting on there?" asked Widget. "'Cos not gonna lie, I don't exactly have sky legs."

"We're landin' in five minutes, but you wanna hurl, you know where the toilet is." N0ize swivelled back to the windscreen. "She's docked at Wave City. We'll be on 'em before you know it. Oh wait… hang on a sec…"

Tracer looked up again and raised an eyebrow at the back of the incineroar's head. "Is there a problem?"

"I'd say so. Little scoundrel is on the move again."

Widget let out a loud groan and slumped onto his belly.

"Calm down, Widget," Tracer told him. "You're creating a scene."

"I can't help it!" Widget whined. "I'm so sick of flying! I'm built to run. Run, I tell you. Run!"

He smacked the floor with his forepaws then buried his nose between them. His long ears drooped at either side of his head and he frowned at the floor.

N0ize laughed again and shook his head. "Such a drama queen. Well, I guess she's done whatever it is she came here to do. You

wanna check on that, Fuzz?"

Tracer trawled through the news sites, but it didn't take him long to find Wave City atop the live news feed. Video footage started playing straight away, and his eyes widened at every word from the marshtomp's mouth.

'I've never seen anything like it,' the water type gasped. 'I can't turn a single corner without fish pokemon braying for their freedom! A small army is on its way into Meta City. I keep saying it's suicide, just like everyone else. But they just won't listen!'

Tracer looked up, the following words barely registering. Widget had lifted his head again, ears pricked and trained on his computer. N0ize peered with one eye over his shoulder, a sly grin painted on his face.

"Looks like she did it then, eh?" The incineroar gave a hearty laugh and swivelled away from them. "Wave City's in an uproar, just like she wanted."

"I'd hardly say that's a good thing!" Tracer barked.

Cyph3r fixed one eye on him but said nothing. The delphox looked back down at his computer. The interview was still playing out, but the footage had changed to display the fish pokemon and all who supported them gathering in a river, preparing to swim down towards Meta City. They'd be risking ploughing through polluted water, so many of them had been kitted out with special masks that reduced what toxins their gills would otherwise be filtering.

No. It wasn't good at all. With Socket soaring miles above System Ground, Wave City threatening an attack on Meta City and all surrounding fisheries would have a huge impact. And quite possibly a disastrous one. One of the concerns brought up on the screen only solidified his worries.

'What's next?" the blastoise roared. 'The fish rebel and what's next? All water types thrown into the mincer? Bugs? Grass types? I tell you, she'll upgrade the menu. It's been done once before, so what's stopping them from doing it again just to shut the rebels' mouths?'

"He has a point," said Widget weakly. "What is stopping them from turning on other pokemon for meat? Berries and vegetables are getting harder and harder to grow in all this toxicity."

"Aye," N0ize agreed. "It's all one big, epic fight for survival. I can't say I blame the fish for getting fed up with it, but eh. Food with a face is gonna argue back at some point, right?"

Tracer felt his fur bristle along his spine and a canine poked out from his lips. The combination of N0ize's flippant attitude and the rising calamity System was facing was seriously taking its toll. Between the alien invaders and Socket's bailing, Annie's ploy to start a rebellion was only adding to the chaos.

"We need to stop her," he thought out loud.

Widget pushed himself up so he was sitting and frowned at Tracer. "What? Please tell me you're not wanting to shoot Socket down. Not that I'm complaining, I mean… think about the mess!"

"No, no. I'm talking about Annie. The human."

"The lass you're fixated with?" N0ize cocked a confused eyebrow and waved a paw at the window. "You wanna shoot her down instead?"

"I'd rather not, but if it comes to it, it might be necessary," said Tracer.

"I don't get it," said Widget. "You went against turning her into Socket because you were worried for her wellbeing, and now you're willing to take her out?"

"Think about it," said Tracer. "Amongst everything that's going on, she's only making things worse. System is practically falling apart at the seams, and most of that is to do with these alien invaders. Annie isn't from our System, Widget. She might be from a System, but it's not ours. Just like those aliens, she's invasive. We don't understand what the aliens are up to. Can they understand us? Are they sentient? Why are they damaging our world? What if they're just trying to adapt, and in doing so are restructuring the environment to suit them? They're trapped here, just like Annie is. But unlike them, we can understand her and she can understand us. Back in her time line, pokemon didn't eat one another. So, in a way, just like those aliens she is trying to restructure System to her own liking. Therefore, she is a threat."

Widget narrowed his eyes and let out a muffled 'huh'.

"We've been studying her." Tracer looked back down at his computer. Now it was showing footage of Annie's speech at the assembly. "I'd like to think she's reasonable, but I'm really not sure. If anything, I'm worried she's very unwell. Either that, or she doesn't think through her actions, acting merely on impulse. That would make her closer to the alien invaders than to us."

"I can see where you're comin' from." N0ize stuck a claw in his ear and twisted it back and forth. "To be honest, I couldn't give a rattata's ass if we ate meat or not. I like it, yeh. But throwin' the entire world into chaos for the sake of a bit of fun? I like the fun part, but not so much the chaos. Let's tail her and shoot that pyukumyuku outta the sky, eh?"

Before Tracer could retort, the ship picked up speed and rocketed through the sky.

"Hang on a second!" he barked. "I never said we're shooting her now. I said if it were necessary-"

"It is, ain't it?" N0ize burst into laughter and leant back in his seat.

All Tracer could do was stare through the windscreen at the speck on the horizon. He could just make out the pyukumyuku's decorative spines.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 62

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Sixty One

The morning sun cascaded down through the glass dome over the lake, reflecting off Macro's pocket computer. The anti-glare coating was doing little to stop the rays dazzling his eyes. But he read on regardless. In front of him, Anchor charged with flaming fangs towards Switch. The talonflame dodged to the side with a graceful flap of his wings. Switch followed this up by kicking up his leg before launching an aerial ace at the granbull. The pair of them paused to look down at their Z-Crystals, and Anchor let out a huff.

"We just ain't gettin' this," he said. "It's been what… three days now?"

"I guess like all moves, they just take practice." Despite his words, Switch didn't sound convinced.

Matrix buzzed onto the back of Macro's bench and wound his antenna in his paw. "Aren't you joining in?"

Macro glanced him out of the corner of his eye, then brought up Meta City News. "I can't. I'm meant to be resting."

"That's never stopped you before."

The mawile snorted and fixed his attention on the screen. His heart did a small flip in his chest and he struck the top headline. A quick read over the article set his blood boiling.

"Are you freakin' kiddin' me?!" he roared.

Anchor and Switch spun on the spot, almost crashing into DL on her way back from a snack run. One of her ice cream cones deposited

cold, pink ice cream onto the floor and Anchor's right leg. The granbull let out a startled squeal, then cleared his throat as he regained his composure.

"Somethin' wrong, Cap'n?" He ducked to wipe his leg before the cheri ice cream turned into a sticky puddle.

"I'd say," Macro scoffed. "Socket's gone and bailed on Meta City."

"She's actually left?" Matrix leant over his shoulder. "I thought she was agoraphobic. She like… never leaves her mansion except in extreme circumstances."

"Well she's not exactly left her mansion." Macro turned the computer so everyone could see it. "Her mansion has left the city."

DL's eyes widened and she dropped her other ice cream. "Is that what he was working on?"

"I'm sorry?" Macro lowered the computer to look at her.

"There was…" DL wound her paws together and glanced away. "There was this door that was always locked. I saw Yobi go into it a few times when I was meant to be helping him. He'd never let me in, we'd only go to his lab. Every time he came out, he'd be covered in grease. I guess… it must have been some kind of engine."

"An engine that allows you to fly a mansion," Macro said bluntly. "No engine can control something much bigger than Wildcard Gamma. Very rarely do I see ships larger than mine. It's playing a risky game. This city we're sat in? Can't move. It just hovers. So how, do tell, can an engine fly a mansion?!"

DL cowered back. "I don't… know…"

Macro sighed and rubbed his paw over his scar. "I'm not having a go, DL. I'm just confused. This technology… has she been hiding it from us?"

"Remember those floating islands I told you about?" Switch asked.

"Yes, I believe you called them 'drifting continents'."

"Well, they could move on a specified path," Switch went on. "But if you overrode the commands, they could be steered. Controlled, perfectly."

Macro looked up at him and narrowed his eyes. "Then if that technology existed way back then, why don't we have improved versions of it now? We could probably fly the entire region."

Switch shrugged his shoulders. "I've no idea. But you did say they never found any engines in what you believed to be the former drifting continents."

"I never believed they found these legendary islands," Macro hissed. "Are you trying to tell me Socket's had their technology stored away in her mansion all this time?!"

"I might be," said Switch. "It's hard to say, but her mansion is in the air. So either there is improved technology that allows something larger than a ship to be flown, or she has the islands' old engines."

"But such technology would be archaic," said Matrix. "Not to mention rusted beyond belief after so many years. How on earth would she get it to work?"

"Maybe Socket wasn't the one who found it," said DL.

Everyone looked up at her, but her eyes were distant. She stared at a tree behind Macro's bench, pawing at her ear.

"That mansion is hundreds of years old," she went on. "Someone else could have found the engines and installed them."

"So this Yobi was performing maintenance work?" Matrix suggested.

"Possibly." DL cleared her throat and glanced at her friends. "But Socket's plan has been in the works for a long time. Since before she even adopted me. It's in this Download Database thing. The reason she adopted me was because she wanted to get her plan in action faster. A younger child would have been easier to manipulate and get on board with her plan, but an older child would mean she wouldn't have to wait for very long. I was the oldest one there. So you could say that for the three years I was with her, her plan was in full motion. She wanted to find this gateway into a new world to build a new System. And to get there, she would fly her mansion. That way she'd never have to leave her house, never have to risk inhaling toxic air. And she'd have a home, while everyone else would have to build theirs from scratch. I'd imagine Yobi was making sure everything was running smoothly so there were no hitches in her plan."

Macro clutched his computer tightly and hissed. "That gothitelle is about as toxic as all the outskirts combined…"

"So how was everyone else gonna get to this world, eh?" Anchor asked. "Does she have ships built for this?"

"Only enough for her select elite," said DL. "Everyone else - commoners, criminals, space pirates - they'd all be left behind."

"Select elite, eh?" Macro scoffed. "So this new would would primarily be made up of psychic, electric and normal types. With a few water types dragged along for food, I'd imagine."

"So all of us would be left here to rot," Anchor growled. "That's brutal."

"That's the job of an uncaring mayor." Macro rose to his feet. "I think I need a walk. This has really got my gogoat."

"Then you might not wanna hear this," said Matrix, scrolling over his own computer. "But Quantum City has been destroyed by another Ultra Beast."

Macro's fur prickled along his neck and he glanced over his shoulder at the ribombee. "Which one?"

"Dunno." Matrix turned his computer to face him. "You tell me."

The photo didn't show any living creature. All it showed was a huge monument surrounded by rubble. Not an Ultra Beast in sight.

"I can't gauge it from the damage alone, Matrix," Macro spat.

The ribombee shrugged and placed his computer back in his lap, twirling his antenna with his right paw. "Well, it said this huge thing dropped from the sky and destroyed the city. What it's showing you here is a crater and the thing that landed."

"So these ones arrived in a ship?" Macro took the small computer from the ribombee and frowned at it. "Weird lookin' ship."

DL looked over his shoulder and made a thoughtful noise. "The picture's not clear enough. I can't match it to any Ultra Beasts in the UltraDex."

Macro returned the computer to Matrix and turned away. Such news had done nothing to lift his mood. If it weren't for Socket's rotten plan, System wouldn't have been under attack from Ultra Beasts in the first place. He turned on the spot and waved a paw.

"I'll be on my ship if you need me," he said.

"All right, Cap'n," said Anchor. "We'll be here trainin'. All that's got me riled up, I could do with burnin' off some energy."

Macro silently agreed, gritting his teeth together. Oh, how he'd love to join in with them. He absently rubbed his ribs as he strutted towards the docks. DL's soft footsteps followed him, but he dared not look back at her. With the mood he was in, he worried he might say something he'd regret.

A loud whoosh followed by a yelp of surprise snapped him around one-eighty and his eyes widened as a spiral of flames washed towards the lake. The end of the inferno tapered towards Anchor's mouth. The granbull's eyes were wide with surprise, but there was no sign of Switch. The inferno subsided and the talonflame flapped like a dazed hatchling from the scorched floor. Flames trailed over the ground towards the lake, slowly rising as they ate away the grass.

"I…" Anchor gasped. "I think I got it to work."

Switch wobbled and slumped to the floor onto his stomach, wings spread-eagled at his sides.

"Are you all right, Switch?" Anchor rushed to his side and placed a paw on his back.

Switch let out a feeble 'yes', reassuring the space pirate.

Macro trotted to the lake to join the water pokemon in putting out the remains of the blaze. He grabbed a bucket from the emergency stand and tossed its contents onto the flames. They sizzled before fizzling out, leaving behind blackened grass. His heart hammered in his chest, and he fixed worried eyes on the two pokemon.

"Okay." His voice wavered slightly and he pointed a claw at Anchor and Switch as he strolled past them. The latter was still sprawled on the floor, eyes rolling in his head. "I'll be on my ship. Don't burn down the city while I'm away, all right?"

"Roger," rasped Switch.

Macro trudged towards the docks, rubbing a paw under his goggles. His mind was reeling. Yet more Ultra Beasts had invaded System, destroying yet another city. In his own attempts to save Pulse City, he'd destroyed another beneath it. Meta City was slowly being reduced to a toxic wasteland, and kartana were tearing up the outskirts. The memory of those bladed beasts made his ribs hurt and

he found himself feeling short of breath. He paused to lean against a lamp post and pulled his goggles from his head.

"Are you all right?" DL placed a paw on his shoulder.

He nodded and gave her paw a soft squeeze before pushing himself on. Once he'd reached his ship, clattering came from the kitchen as Cookie shot to the door and poked his head around it.

"Captain!" Cookie's face lit up with a smile. "Are you wanting some lunch? I'm making chocolate chip pancakes!"

"Ring the bell, I'll see how I feel."

Macro watched the slurpuff duck back into the kitchen, then made for his room. He closed the door before DL could follow him inside, and threw himself onto his back on the bed.

"Macro?" Her voice was muffled slightly by the door. "Can I get you anything?"

"No." He let his arm flop over his eyes. "But I'll call if I change my mind."

"All right. I'll be helping Cookie if you need me."

He heard her shuffle away down the corridor. With a flustered sigh, he let his arm fall back down beside him and stared up at the ceiling. Five more days. He had five more days before he would be potentially declared fit for work. 'Potentially' wasn't a guarantee. It didn't sit well with him.

Every second he spent lounging around Cyan City was another second Socket was rolling with her plan. Another second that Ultra Beasts were allowed into System. Another second that a city was at risk of falling under attack, that pokemon were being killed, that cities were falling. Another second towards the risk of an Ultra Beast striking Cyan City while he was nothing more than a sitting ducklett.

But it wasn't Socket opening those gateways herself. It was BackDoor. Socket's androids were scattered over System Sky looking for a gateway into a new, clean world. If they took out the androids, then her plan would screech to a halt. Solgaleo had gifted them a way to stop BackDoor. Anchor had managed to get his Z-Move to work. It would only be a matter of time before the rest of them would get their Z-Crystals under control. However, Macro was in no fit state to fight. Neither was DL.

DL… her electric moves could prove to be very useful in this upcoming battle. Androids were riddled with wires and circuits. One jolt and BackDoor would crumple into a sparking, useless scrap heap.

Macro sat up straight as his reeling mind slowed to a halt. That was it. If they were going to stop Socket, DL needed to use her Z-Move. But with no knowledge of her electrical attacks, there was no way she could master it. The sooner she got them back, the sooner she could get practising. And by then, he'd be able to fight as well, whether he was given the all clear or not. He flipped himself off his bed and rushed out of the room towards the cockpit. He stopped before the controls and looked over them. A jumble of mess he'd never been able to get his head around. He grabbed the steering stick and gave it a wiggle. Nothing.

"Come on, Macro, think!" he barked.

His eye fell on a panel beside the stick and he placed his paw over it. The ship flared to life. Another jiggle of the stick made the ship lurch and before he knew it, they were moving backwards.

Claws skittered over the floor as DL dashed into the cockpit. She glanced around before stopping beside him, fixing Cyan City with frantic eyes.

"What are you doing?!" she squeaked.

"Getting your other memory disks," he said flatly as he loaded up what he desperately hoped was the auto pilot feature.

"Without the rest of your crew?" she gasped. "Are you nuts?!"

"Nope, I am actually thinking straight." A surge of relief flowed through him as he found a list of locations logged into the auto pilot. "Thank goodness this is here, 'cos I don't know nothin' about co-ordinates."

"Could you explain yourself?" DL snapped. "Before I'm forced to call Anchor? Or Jumper?"

He looked up at her, meeting her chocolate glare. "We need your moves, DL. If you can use your electric Z-Move on BackDoor, it'll short circuit it. Socket's plan will screech to a halt, and we can get a jump on her. Stop all this nonsense before it goes any further."

"But what about the rest of your crew? You're just leaving them?"

"They're in the best place right now. They can practice their attacks, get a head start on them while the two of us aren't able to train. If they can utilise Z-Moves, they might be able to teach us faster. And even if things are a little slow, three of my crew being able to use them will put us at a huge advantage when we face BackDoor."

"So you're leaving your crew behind, including Anchor who's had your back more times than I could even guess, in order to get my memories? Just so we can launch ourselves into battle against a deranged robot?!"

"Yes!" Macro fixed her in a violet stare. "With that android flyin' around out there, Ultra Beasts are being dragged into System and it needs to stop!"

"It will stop."

"Yes, after I've 'recovered'! In the meantime, System is under attack and Socket's army is doin' nothin' to stop it! We've been tasked to stop this android and mark my words we're gonna succeed! Now strap yourself in, sweetheart, 'cos I don't know what I'm doin'."

DL let out a sigh and shoved him aside, taking over the controls. He watched as her paws flew over them with expert speed and precision. Well… Anchor had successfully trained her. He climbed into his seat, leaving DL to take Anchor's over-sized chair.

"Where are we going?" She still didn't sound remotely impressed.

"Botnet City." He tucked his paws behind his head and leant back in his seat. "We'll tick that one off the list first. Then we'll worry about Socket's floating mansion."

…

Matrix pointed a tiny paw, drawing Anchor's attention away from Switch's attack. The talonflame was already in full swing, but Anchor was rendered oblivious as he watched Wildcard Gamma drifting across the sky, away from Cyan City. His eyes widened and he opened his mouth to shout, but was cut short as Switch's aerial ace collided with his jaw. Anchor staggered sideways, flailing his arms to right his balance.

"What in the world?!" he roared.

"Sorry," said Switch. "It was too late to stop. What distracted you?"

"That!" Anchor pointed a claw at the ship. "Macro has gone and left us here! The lunatic!"

"He did seem rather riled up," said Matrix.

Anchor locked his eyes on the ribombee's, but Matrix merely shrugged as he span his antenna around his paw.

Switch's jaw stiffened and he looked from the space pirates to the ship and back. "I'd like to say he has good reason for this, but none of us are bedridden this time."

"Good reason my tail." Anchor barged past Switch, flames flickering from his jaws. "I'll drag him back here by his scarf."

Switch fluttered his wings as he struggled to keep up with him. "How do you plan on going after him?"

"I'll see if Jumper has a ship I can borrow. Macro can barely fly Wildcard Gamma so it shouldn't take me too long to catch up."

"But DL does," said Matrix. "And she's with him."

The granbull snorted and fired a glance towards the rapidly vanishing ship. "Then I'll chase that mawile across System if I have to."

"Have you any idea where he's going?" Switch asked. "Or why he's doing this?"

"He's doin' it 'cos he's crazy and got no patience," said Anchor. "He's throwin' himself in harm's way right after that kartana attack, and I ain't about to let him do that! As for where he's goin'? If it's for DL's disks, then it's one of two places. Botnet or Meta. And I'm gonna bank all my credits on it bein' Botnet. 'Cos he might be crazy, but he ain't daft enough to face up against Socket when he's barely able to fight a hatchling."

Anchor marched across the square, pushing through the crowds towards the town hall. The blastoise on duty cast them a filthy look before he stepped aside. Anchor muttered a 'thanks' then stomped over to the Governor's office. He didn't even knock. Jumper looked up with a start and was about to dismiss them, but his eyes widened when he spotted the three pokemon.

The frogadier lowered his stamp and his face fell. "What's happened?"

"Macro's high tailed it outta here," said Anchor. "Left us behind."

"Seriously? But he's in no fit state to work!"

"I know, but he clearly don't care."

"So he's just gone, like that? What ever for?"

"I have a good, solid guess." The granbull folded his arms and snorted. "Any chance you've got a ship we can borrow? 'Cos I'm gonna go after him, and I'll hijack one if I have to."

"There'll be no need for that." Jumper rose to his feet and gestured for Anchor to follow him. "I've got three government battleships, and you are free to borrow one. Just… please try to bring it back in one piece?"

"Aye."

"A battleship?" Switch stuttered. "We're taking after him in a vehicle of war?"

"I personally think that's awesome," said Matrix.

Anchor faltered by the door and scratched his mohawk. "I'm not entirely sure we'll be thinking of it as 'awesome' when we catch up with him. Mood he's been in, he'll fire on a government ship."

Jumper looked over his shoulder at him. "Well I'm afraid I don't have any other option."

Anchor let out a sigh and waved a paw in defeat. "Fine. We'll take one. Unfortunately it means we'll have to give him a heads up, especially if you want it back in one piece."

"I'd rather you all came back in one piece, not just the ship."

Jumper led them out the side of the town hall and towards the docks. Hidden away from the smaller, domestic ships was a neat row of glistening, golden government battleships. Their pointed appearance was intimidating despite their small size. There would be little chance of sleeping on them, and for three pokemon to fit inside would be rather snug. Matrix might have been able to find a corner out of the way, but Switch and Anchor would be shoulder to shoulder.

"Given you're only intending on catching up with him," said Jumper as he led them along towards them, "It shouldn't be too uncomfortable. Once you're back at your ship, I imagine you could deliver mine back in its cargo hold?"

"Shouldn't be a problem," said Anchor.

A small clang rang out from behind him and he span on his heel. Matrix appeared almost out of thin air and bobbed backwards, slightly dazed. He shook out his antenna and pointed a paw.

"There's a cloaked ship here." His voice wavered slightly.

"Eh?"

They all stared at the spot, aghast. If it was a cloaked ship, it was a very good cloak. System Sky was as clear as day through it. Matrix vanished back beyond the cloak, humming to himself as he zipped back and forth out of sight. He buzzed backwards away from it and rubbed his chin.

"It's a tympole ship," he said.

"Really?" Jumper's eyes widened briefly then his snout creased into a frown. "There's another space pirate here?"

"I guess so," said Anchor, eyeing the invisible ship with admiration. "Must have cost a pretty penny, that cloak. And I thought ours was good."

"So whose is it?" Jumper asked. "Do you know them?"

"Not sure, if I'm honest," said Anchor. "I see a lot of ships. Pirates come and go. There's new ships being built every day. Has to be, since they can get pretty beat up. Wildcard Gamma is our third, yanno."

"So you've no idea at all?" asked Jumper. "No idea who I need to look for?"

"Exactly. If they're a water type, they'd blend in pretty well."

"Then maybe I should stay behind and assist the police force?" said Switch. "Get to the bottom of it."

"Might be the best plan," said Anchor.

"No need." The female voice made them all jump out of their skin.

Anchor spun on the spot, and his expression fell at a zigzagoon's familiar face. She looked at each of them in turn, her claws flexing at her sides. Itching as they sought out her hidden laser.

"Well, well." Jumper folded his arms and shifted his weight to one leg. "I have to say, I'm a little disappointed such a pretty young girl has set out on a life of piracy."

"I'm not a pirate," she said. "I'm a mercenary."

"Oh." Jumper jolted slightly. "How can I believe you?"

"Scan me if you wish." Surge nodded towards her invisible ship. "Now if you don't mind, I have a pirate to chase after."

"Hang on one stinkin' second!" Anchor grabbed her shoulder and spun her back towards him. "I ain't just gonna let you chase after Macro like that! What kinda heartless lass are you anyway? Helpin' him out then turnin' on him like this?"

Surge's muzzle stiffened and she swatted his paw away. "I'm doing my job."

"What? Are all mercenaries traitors?"

"Someone pays me, I do their job. Macro paid me, so I worked for him. Socket is paying me, so I'm working for her."

Matrix 'hmm'd' and twirled his antenna. "Last I heard, Socket was after your head."

Surge flashed a canine and let out a low growl. "She'll be singing and dancing when I turn him in to her."

"What, you think she'll let you off the hook?" Anchor growled.

"Given how long she's been after him, yes."

Those words made Anchor's heart sink. He balled his paws into fists and hot cinders trickled from his teeth. Jumper placed a paw on his arm and ushered him aside. The frogadier's eyes were trained on Surge, and Anchor spotted a ball of frubbles hidden in his paw behind his back.

"Listen, ma'am," he said. "Wildcard Gamma are under my protection in Cyan City. Whereas you might see this as controversial, I can't ignore your attempts to harm my good friends. I think I speak for the entire city. So I suggest you come with me, or my entire armed forces will be out here to apprehend you."

Surge let out a bitter laugh. "So you speak for the entire city, do you? If only you knew. I've not been working alone here, Governor."

Jumper jolted again, enough for Surge to whip out her laser and back towards her ship.

"Stay back!" she barked. "I've got almost ever type, and I've not come in here unprepared."

"Bragging?" Switch whispered to Anchor.

"I'd say," the granbull whispered back.

He shot Matrix a grin and the ribombee nodded, ducking down towards the ship. Surge was too focused on the larger pokemon to notice. She reached beneath her jacket and the ship de-cloaked, revealing the smiling tympole. She took another step backwards and a grimace spread across her face. She looked down at her foot and tried to lift it, but sticky webs held her fast to the docks.

Jumper let loose his frubbles, knocking the laser from her paw where it landed harmlessly encased in the foamy mass. Anchor barrelled past her and she let out a wail as she tried to spin towards him.

"What do you think you're doing?!" she screeched. "Get off my ship!"

Anchor threw a grin in her direction before following Matrix onto the ship. Switch followed after him, winking at Surge as he hopped past.

"Thanks for the sweet ride," he said. "We'll be sure to give it back."

Surge seethed and sank to her bottom, clenching her paws so tightly her pads bled. Jumper crouched behind her and tugged her paws towards him behind her back, before securing them with his frubbles.

"You're coming with me, ma'am," he said.

"You can't hold me for long," she hissed. "Socket won't stand for it."

"Oh, I'm aware," he said. "But that doesn't mean you can't answer questions."

Anchor burst into laughter as he watched the zigzagoon be steered away, then familiarised himself with the controls.

"This is just perfect," he said. "Not tiny, and it looks like a space pirate ship. Not to mention Surge can't give chase without it."

"That's well and good and all," said Matrix from the navigation dash. "But there's just one tiny hitch in our plan."

"Oh? What's that?" Anchor asked.

"Macro made it very clear that Surge isn't an ally, and I'm fairly certain he knows her ship."

Anchor and Switch blinked at him.

"Yeh," Matrix went on. "So it doesn't really matter what ship we take off in. He's still gonna shoot at us."

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 63

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Sixty Two

Jumper stared across his desk at Surge, his eyes narrowed in a way that greatly unnerved her. His chin rested on his steepled paws, and not a single glint of uncertainty crossed his features. The fact her paws were still trapped in sticky frubbles did nothing to aid her confidence. No way to defend herself. Surrounded on all sides by members of his police force. A quagsire sat beside her with a small lie detector hooked up to a tablet computer. It didn't intimidate her in the slightest.

A large empoleon the frogadier had addressed as 'Heatsink' jabbed her in the side with one of his sharp flippers, prompting her to speak. She hissed at him and shuffled in her seat, masking her attempts to remove her restraints as an attempt to make herself more comfortable.

"I'll ask you again." Jumper's voice was steady and patient. "You said you've not been working alone. Now who were you working with?"

"And I told you that would be a breach of confidence," she replied.

"I think you've got a lot more to worry about right now than a breach of confidence." The governor sat back in his seat and rapped his fingers on his desk. "There is a law in this city that no one is to harm pokemon under our protection. I owed that to Wildcard, given they saved this city from a war resulting in famine. Thanks to them, one of the biggest scourges in Luma City's army has been removed, and while we're still recovering from the aftermath, we could have ended up a lot worse off if it weren't for Macro and his friends." He narrowed his eyes again. "So tell me who you've been working with."

Surge's lip curled up into a smile. Luma City… a place filled with grass types. That Midi was starting to look a little suspicious now. Who's side was he really on?

"You can smirk until the miltank come home." Jumper shook his head. "It's not going to help you."

"I'm just thinking," said Surge, "that you might want to consider that not everyone in this place is on Cyan City's side."

Jumper raised an eyebrow, and the vaporeon behind her let out a gasp.

"Are you saying there are traitors out there?" Jumper asked. "Spies?"

Surge shrugged as best she could. "No idea. But I'd take things with a pinch of salt."

Floppy bounced to her side and fixed her with cold, black eyes. "You'd better talk! Because I'm feeling pretty trigger happy right now!"

His cold breath frosted over her fur and she grimaced.

"I'm not saying anything," she said. "Not after you let Macro's goons take off in my ship!" She leered across at Jumper and he sighed, swiping a paw over his glossy desk. "Besides, you can't keep me here for long. Socket wouldn't stand for it. She's hired me!"

"You're right," said Jumper. "I can't keep you here for long. Not if Socket did indeed hire you. But I'm afraid this says otherwise."

He pushed a flier towards her. Her face frowned back at her, complete with fifty thousand credits scrawled below her chest. And there with it, her crime. Hacking. No further details, just plain and simple.

"Now, allow me to put the pieces together," he explained. "You've shown up here looking… how do I put this? Different from this poster. No bandana, a black dress rather than a waistcoat. And you've brushed your fur so much it looks like a transition between zigzagoon and linoone."

She glanced down at her tail, smoothed out yet still ragged, a dead giveaway to her species. Regardless, it took away that rugged look she'd worn for years.

"If you indeed are working for Socket," said Jumper, "then why has she put out a wanted poster for you?"

Surge tightened her jaw as she stared back at him. Why, indeed? It was written right on the poster. Socket didn't like hackers, that much was obvious. But her targets very rarely rose over ten thousand credits.

Jumper steepled his paws together again and leant towards her. "You said you'd done some work for Macro. I'm well aware of what DL is. Socket took her memories, made her into a machine."

"Computer," Surge corrected.

Jumper shrugged. "Computers are machines. But you've only aided in proving my point with that little statement. I suspect Macro hired you to hack Socket's databases in order to find out what exactly happened to little DL. Am I right?"

She pulled her lips back from her teeth but said nothing. The frogadier was really beginning to get on her nerves.

"I think you want to catch Macro in order to make amends with Socket," he went on. "But I highly doubt that she'll-"

"She's already wiped my slate."

Jumper raised an eyebrow.

"I've forwarded her new information," Surge went on. "As a result, she's given me a second chance to catch him. Although my payment has taken a pretty big hit."

"I'm not certain I believe you."

The quagsire looked up and nodded. "This says she's telling the truth."

Jumper examined her from his seat, trailing his eyes up and down her body for any hint of a lie. Surge chuckled and shook her head. Useless. As if she hadn't trained with lie detectors before.

"You heard it straight from a tangle of wires." She shrugged. "Can you really take the chance in keeping me here, then? If I'm right, Socket might execute you. If I'm wrong… well, you've let a wanted 'mon escape." A smirk tugged at her lips and she chuckled again. "I'd hate to be you right now."

Heatsink frowned and looked at Jumper, keeping his bladed flipper near Surge's neck. "Lie detectors ain't perfect. You really wanna take that risk?"

Jumper rubbed a paw over his face and sank back in his chair. "No. Not really."

Surge resisted the urge to grin.

"Now, about that pokemon who helped you," Jumper went on.

"If I tell you, what will happen to him?" she asked.

"He'll be locked up here in our cells," said Jumper. "I can't say how long, that will take a jury to decide. But if I were to hazard a guess… for attempting to hand a protected citizen over to his death… I'd say fifteen years."

Fifteen years… She'd never even have to look back at Cyan City. "All right, I'll tell you. His name's Midi."

"Really?" Jumper's eyes almost bugged out of his head. "So you'll happily hand him over to us then? I'll guess you made a deal and don't want to follow it through. What did you offer him? A cut of your share? Before Socket docked it, no doubt."

Surge shrugged. "A 'mon's gotta get by."

"You're notorious." Jumper jotted the name down on his pad. "Heatsink, see Surge to a cell and locate this Midi. I believe he's a lombre."

Heatsink snorted. "I've had dealings with him before. I know who he is."

The empoleon jabbed Surge with his flipper and she slid to her feet. She aimed a glare at Jumper and wrestled with her restraints.

"I thought you said you weren't gonna keep me here!" she barked.

"I don't really want to," said Jumper. "But your ship is currently AWOL."

She spat on the floor. "Yeh, no thanks to you!"

Jumper closed his eyes as he leant his head in one paw and waved the other. "Take her away. I'll deal with her once her ship has been returned."

"You really think Wildcard's gonna return her ship?" Floppy asked. "Macro knows she's after him. If I were him, I'd leave it somewhere. Like the bottom of the ocean."

"Then we'll find another way to get her out of the city. I'll cross that bridge when we come to it." Jumper shooed the other pokemon out of his room. "Go. I need to file all this."

Surge glared at him over her shoulder, but searing cold shot up her spine as Floppy launched an ice beam at her tail.

"Keep walkin'," he growled.

She muttered under her breath and turned to exit the office. Trapped between three large pokemon, she stomped after them as they led her to the cells.

…

The sharpedo ship grew steadily closer to the pyukumyuku, covering distance at a speed Tracer found difficult to describe. Any second now, Cyph3r would unleash an attack. The delphox's heart sank. That pyukumyuku looked harmless. The aquatic pokemon the ship was modelled on, however, was packed full of surprises. If you hit one, it would hit you back with twice as much force. Tracer stroked his chin as he wondered how that would be incorporated into a ship built in a criminals' back yard out of scraps. The flimsy structure looked like it would fall apart if he so much as breathed on it.

"All right!" N0ize grinned at his pilot. "We're close enough. Unleash the torpedoes."

The magmortar's single paw nimbly flew across the dash, lighting up an array of buttons. Something deep within the ship whirred like a well-oiled motor. It probably was.

N0ize chuckled and leant back in his seat so far it creaked beneath his weight. "These oughta punch through that hull like a knife through cheese."

"I think butter would be a better description," said Widget. The incineroar leered back at him, but he didn't so much as flinch. "It's softer," he added.

N0ize grinned from ear to ear and pointed a claw at the eevee. "I like you, little mutt."

Widget snorted through his nose but said nothing.

The whirring stopped, followed by a deep roar. Ahead of them, three grinning carvanah whizzed towards the pyukumyuku. The rickety ship dropped several feet before the missiles had a chance to hit, letting them soar harmlessly overhead.

N0ize's face fell and he scratched inside his ear. "Nimble piece o' junk, eh? Make us swerve up and down and send a barrage. Let's see if they can dodge that."

Tracer leapt to his feet and dived across the cockpit, grabbing the magmortar's paw in both arms. He fixed a leer on N0ize.

"Is this a game to you?" he barked.

N0ize stared back at him and Tracer's fur stood on end as an electrically charged hum emanated behind him from Cyph3r's railgun.

"What if it is?" the incineroar rumbled. "You want that human threat removed, and I'm just providing pest control." A grin split his face, chilling Tracer to the core. "If I'm havin' a little fun doin' it, so what?"

Tracer's lip twitched as he searched for any reason the pirates should call off the attack. Static was slowly filling his fur, turning him into a bronze brush.

"It's murder," he said flatly. "Other pokemon are on that ship."

"Aye, criminals." N0ize grinned again. "We'd be savin' Socket a job."

"I doubt she'd see it that way."

"What does she care, anyway?" The incineroar threw a paw in the air. "She's miles above Meta City dealin' with them alien things. Let's shoot this human down and put an end to this rebellion. Either way, rebellion or not, I don't rightly care. I'm just in this for the fun. Hit it, Cyph3r."

The magmortar clubbed Tracer over the head with his railgun arm and a grunt came from the detective's nose as he crumpled to the floor. Before he could jump back up, that whirring filled the ship again. It swerved up and down, sending a wave of nausea through Tracer's gut. Although that was more likely to do with the whack he'd received. At some point, Widget had attached himself to the magmortar's arm. The large fire pokemon waved him off, sending Widget sprawling across the cockpit floor to land in a heap against the wall. Tracer rolled towards the eevee and pushed himself up, wobbling slightly. His ears were ringing. He barely heard the roar as the missiles flew towards Annie's ship. Twelve of them, soaring towards her in a figure eight. They'd been aimed in such a way the ones at the top and bottom of the attack were curving towards the ship.

"They're not gonna dodge that," Widget muttered.

The eevee pushed himself up and shook out his massive ears. The pair of them watched in horror as the pyukumyuku tried to dodge. At least… that's what it looked like. The ship swerved to the side and just kept going, turning to face towards them. A long, stretchy arm swung out from its nose, sweeping towards the missiles in an arc. The top most ones were caught in its slimy appendage and knocked towards the ones below it. They exploded on impact, blowing both ships away from each other.

The sharpedo shook and keeled backwards. N0ize let out a grunt of surprise and blinked a few times.

"Guess it's got more defences than I thought." He roared with laughter and struck the dash. "I like it! Send another flurry, let's see what else this piece of junk can do."

Cyph3r sent out another torrent of missiles. Five more carvanah flew at the pyukumyuku. It swatted aside three of them, but one of the missiles hit its 'innards out'. The missile exploded, shrapnel striking the ship and its lone weapon. The slimy thing was torn to ribbons,

and a huge chunk of it fell with the missiles still wrapped in its gooey fist.

If a ship could look surprised, the pyukumyuku managed it down to a T. It turned tail and tried to saunter away to freedom.

"We've got it!" N0ize barked. "Chase after it!"

The magmortar pointed a claw at the dash and fixed N0ize in a glare. The incineroar leant over to see what he was pointing at and grunted.

"All out of missiles, eh?" He shrugged. "Guess we're usin' our close range attacks then. Full speed and crunch!"

"Close range?" Widget gasped. "Oh boy. We're gonna die."

"You don't sound very distressed," Tracer muttered.

"I'm running on adrenaline. This is awesome."

N0ize flashed the eevee a grin. "That's the spirit, mutt. You wanna evolve into a flareon and join my ranks?"

"Nope, can't and don't want to." Widget puffed out his chest, flashing his everstone. "I'm awesome just the way I am, thank you very much."

N0ize turned away and scratched inside his ear again. "Such a waste. All right! We're close enough!"

The sharpedos jaws opened slowly, gaining on the pyukumyuku inch by inch. Tracer pulled himself up on the dashboard and fixed wide eyes on Annie's ship. Were those decorative spikes trembling? How much damage had they done? The thing was about to fall apart. Shredded to bits at the jaws of some deranged space pirate's vessel. He glanced at each of the space pirates in turn, a deep dread rising within him. He'd made some pretty bad mistakes in his life, but this

one definitely took the biscuit. His paw sought out his stick. One dazzling gleam and he was taking over the sharpedo.

A flash of green caught his eye and he snapped his head around just as two of the spikes launched from the pyukumyuku on rusted chains. They struck the sharpedo, one spike striking the side of its jaws. The other one smashed through the windscreen, almost impaling N0ize to his seat. The incineroar let out a squeal that didn't suit his appearance at all.

The spike retracted back towards the ship, their rusted chains rattling and creaking. They didn't quite make it back, dangling behind the ship like a pair of tails.

Cyph3r leant over the dashboard towards N0ize and aimed his railgun arm out of the window. It hummed, growing with intensity as the entire length of the coil lit up. Then, a long beam of electricity shot towards the pyukumyuku. Something hidden in that beam struck it, creating a hole in its tail. Shrapnel rained down around it, and the small ship ducked and swerved as it tried to regain balance. Then… it began to descend towards System Ground.

Tracer's jaw dropped as he watched it vanish through the clouds. He swallowed dryly and licked his lips.

"What have you just done?" he whispered.

N0ize blinked as he tried to gather himself and ran a paw over his ears. "Wretched thing's busted my windscreen."

Widget's head appeared on the other side of his lap, his brown eyes livid. "Yeh? Well you just busted their entire ship!"

"Just doin' my job." N0ize glared at the shattered glass and rubbed his arms. "Let's turn back and head somewhere we can do repairs. I ain't flyin' with a wrecked window. It's freezin' up here. All six of my nipples could cut glass!"

Tracer let out a growl and retreated to the back of the cockpit, Widget in tow. The eevee sat down heavily and looked up at him.

"I think you're suffering from a rare case of 'moral dilemma'," he said.

Tracer pulled a cigar from his pocket. N0ize couldn't exactly complain now the window was smashed. He fixed Widget with an unreadable look and let a lick of flames light the end of his cigar before popping it between his teeth.

"What makes you say that?" he asked.

"You can't make your mind up about the girl," the eevee explained. "Now we have two choices. Find parachutes and bail, or wait for this ship to land and go find her."

"You two ain't goin' nowhere," said N0ize. "It's your target that busted my ship, so you're payin'." He glared at them over his shoulder, a glare that chilled Tracer so much he feared he'd been frozen solid. "You got a problem with that, there are other ways to squeeze the credits outta you. I can think of twelve ways off the top of my head." A grin. Not a friendly one. "I'll leave that to your imagination."

The incineroar turned away and Tracer's cigar dropped from his mouth into his lap. Widget looked up at him, his ears slightly drooped.

"Man, Tracer… I think we might have just been abducted."

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"Did you install any parachutes in this thing?" Web desperately clutched her seat while Poipole clung to her back in sheer panic.

"No, I didn't install any parachutes!" Trojan barked back.

"Why? Did it just not occur to you?!"

"Clearly not!"

"I hate to be the one to speak the obvious," said Annie. "But two of us have wings."

All eyes flew to the human. A sneer crossed Trojan's face only to be quickly wiped away by fear as the ship swerved towards the ground once more.

"Well I also hate to be the one to speak the obvious," he growled, "but you currently don't!"

Annie looked down at her human self.

"Are we gonna die?" Zip squeaked.

Water sloshed from his bowl with every stomach-churning lurch.

"No we're not," said Trojan. "Because I'm gonna fix this bag o' bolts. All right?" He vanished beneath the dashboard, stumbling as the ship continued to lose altitude. "Someone man the controls!"

Waveform pushed Annie back into her seat and took Trojan's seat. A few tugs of the steering stick and the ship levelled out. Annie's eyes widened and she removed her hands from her head.

"Have you fixed it?" Her bottom left her seat as the ship dropped another few feet. "I guess not."

"I have a question," said Web. "How does a hole in the tail of the ship affect the engine if it's in the front?"

"It doesn't," said Trojan. "The engine's fine. That blast, whatever it was, removed the rudder and shook up the thrusters that keep us in the air."

"So what are you trying to do?"

He pulled his head out and glared at her. "Increase the thrust so we can at least land on dry ground!" Another plummet. He struck his

head on the dash and swore loudly. "Everyone shut up and let me work, alright?!"

Annie sank into her seat and placed a finger on her lips, just like children are told to do when they're required to shush. Waveform raised an eyebrow at her then turned back to the controls.

"Well if we're probably gonna die," said Zip quietly, "I want to thank you guys for helping me. And being a friend. For showing me that other pokemon actually care for us water dwellers."

"We ain't gonna die," said Trojan. "Shut your berry hole."

"You're very welcome, Zip," said Web. "And ignore him, he's just as scared as the rest of us."

"I want to thank you as well," said Poipole. "Other pokemon had tried to shoot at me."

"Well, if we're all doing the thanking thing," said Annie, "then I want to thank you all for… erm… doing this rebellion thing. And… dang it, I was sure there was something else."

"Taking you in?" Web helped.

"Yes! Yes, exactly." Annie folded her hands behind her head, but the ship gave another lurch that pushed her to cower in her seat. "I don't like this. I want off."

"We all want off," said Waveform. "But that's not an option. This ship needs her captain."

Annie removed her arms from her head and looked around at her crew. Terrified faces. Except Waveform who looked as collected as he often did. She cleared her throat and sat up straight.

"All right!" she said. "Onward to dry ground! We ain't sea pirates, we're space pirates! We don't do the swimmin' thing."

"I do," said Zip.

"Well… the rest of us aren't as talented as you, little fish. I don't like getting wet."

"Seconded," said Waveform.

"Thirded," added Poipole.

"Where's the closest dry land?" Annie asked.

The thrusters roared and the ship levelled out. The hull still trembled like a terrified child, but things felt… firmer.

Trojan climbed out from the dashboard and shooed Waveform from his seat.

"There," he said. "That should get us to the coastline at least."

"So it's fixed?" Web's eyes narrowed. "I find that very hard to believe."

"It ain't fixed," he said. "It's merely tweaked so we don't crash and die in the sea. Is that good enough for everyone?"

A chorus of 'yes' echoed through the cockpit.

Trojan nodded and turned back to his controls. "That's what I like to hear."

The ship trembled and ducked slightly, causing Zip to yelp.

"What was that?" Annie asked.

Trojan didn't even look up. "Let's not talk about it."

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The beartic leant towards the camera, as close as he could get to the microphone without knocking the camera 'mon over.

"What do you mean it'll all blow over?!" he screamed at the interviewer. "Between here and Wave City, fisheries have been dragged to the ground! Electricity, scalding water, rocks! Smashed to bits! Pokemon have died!"

The interviewer pushed him back so she could get back into the camera shot. The young gardevoir brushed her paw over her head, trying her best not to sigh with frustration.

"All wars come to an end eventually," she said. "Let's not get System riled up over pointless propagan-"

"Pointless?!" the beartic hissed. "The water types are revolting and the mayor couldn't give a -" Someone managed to beep out the beartic's language. Most likely an exploud.

The ice type was taken away, while the gardevoir returned to the camera.

"As you can see," she said, "the oceans have done a double take. Turning to the land to right the massive wrong made centuries ago, riding on the coat tails of a group named Time Archeops. Will the little goldeen and his friends manage to turn this around? Will fisheries fall? Or will all of System fight back, brining an end to any rights the water dwellers currently have left?"

Anchor groaned and closed his eyes. "Switch it off, Matrix. It's depressin' me."

"But you don't eat fish," said the ribombee. "What's the problem?"

"It's not the fish that's the problem, it's the situation!" Anchor waved a paw towards the dark space ahead. "System's fallin'. Any other time, I'd be backin' a rebellion like this. But now ain't the time! We've got bigger fish to fry, if you'll excuse the expression."

"I will not excuse it," said Switch. "I think it was in very bad taste."

Anchor sighed and brushed back his mohawk. "Sorry. I'll try to think of better words to use when my brain is frazzled. Let's just… focus on catchin' up with Macro, okay?"

The cockpit fell into silence as Matrix stuffed his computer back into his belt pouch. The lone tympole ship trundled along, growing gradually closer to the schooling wishiwashi, while miles below the oceans glowed yellow as the lanturn rallied their masses. Somewhere, another fishery fell, washed away beneath the chaos that the Ultra Beasts were bringing.

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A/N - The last bit was kinda added on today, given I'd kinda… forgotten about the fish. Pantsing problem. Ah well, at least we get some Wildcard Gamma this chapter! Please R&R! =D

Chapter 64

A/N - There's a slight change to my upload schedule. It will now be either Saturday OR Sunday depending on my own schedule, as Saturdays are growing gradually busier. Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows!

Chapter Sixty Three

Surge's tympole ship was fast. Certainly fast enough to catch up with Wildcard Gamma. If Macro had noticed it, he certainly hadn't acted. His schooling wishiwashi trundled along as nonchalant as a ship could appear.

"We're almost there," said Matrix. "Either this ship's cloak keeps us off Wildcard Gamma's radar, or he just couldn't care less."

"Or he knows it's us," said Switch.

"He won't know it's us," said Anchor. "Surge has been following us all across System. Maybe he just doesn't see her as a threat?"

"I'm banking on him not seeing us." Matrix lazily wound his antenna and glanced over his shoulder at the granbull. "Unless DL's driving and she doesn't know how to deal with a threatening ship?"

Anchor jolted and fixed his eyes on Wildcard Gamma's tail. "I thought I taught her how to use the weapons."

"You're worrying about that?" Switch gasped. "Be glad she's not firing on us!"

Anchor looked back at the talonflame, but before he could speak, Switch flapped his wings in what little space he had available.

"Eyes on the road!" he snapped.

"Sheesh, calm down." Anchor turned back in his seat and steered the ship as Macro's turned towards Botnet City's blinking antenna. "Anyone would think you were scared of flyin'."

"No, I am fine with flying," said Switch. "I just prefer to be in control of my own wings."

"I know that feel," said Matrix.

"Well, I'd say it's about time he noticed us," said Anchor. "Before he throws himself into danger. 'Cos I sincerely doubt Botnet's gonna welcome him with open paws."

"Do most places?" Switch asked. "'Cos I get the feeling not many places welcome you."

"Botnet City is a whole kinda special on that regard." Anchor reached across the dashboard and launched the tympole's turrets. "One missile oughta get his attention."

"You're actually firing on your own ship?" Switch gasped.

"Just the one," said Anchor.

"But that's crazy!" said Switch. "You could kill him!"

"Not if I know where to hit. Besides, it's a secret space pirate language. Single shot fired, then strafe to the side and hold off firin'. Let's them know you only want their attention."

"Well I still think it's nuts." Switch huddled down into his feathers. "I'd bail this ship if I had the chance. What if he fires on us?"

"He shouldn't. Now let me focus." Anchor reached for the missile button. "I don't wanna do too much damage, especially since I'll be the one doin' the repairs."

…

The closer they drew to Botnet City, the more hollowed out Macro began to feel. Without his crew, he felt very exposed. No sooner had he spotted the blinking antenna in the distance, he retreated to his room. Out of sight, but definitely not out of mind. Given Botnet wasn't a billion miles from Cyan City, it had taken them less than a day to reach it. Each mile they grew closer to it, the more anxious he became. His yellow fur was damp with sweat and he tossed and turned on his bed, desperate to think about anything else.

A violent tremor shook the ship and Macro hit the floor nose first. He pushed himself up, groaning as he rubbed his snore snout, and looked over his shoulder at his closed door. What on earth was that? Botnet's missiles couldn't reach this far, could they? Unless he was much closer than he'd initially thought.

He sprang to his feet and bolted from the room, fastening his goggles in place as he sped down the hallway. A frantic DL turned the corner before he could stop, and she crashed straight into him, bowling him backwards onto his bottom. He caught her before she hit the ground, her weight knocking him flat on his back. He pushed himself back up and opened his eyes, meeting DL's. That hollowed feeling seemed to fade away, filling up with something warm and fuzzy. He brushed his claws across her cheek and chuckled.

"I think we need a 'no running' rule," he said.

She grabbed his paw in hers, but that frantic look didn't leave her eyes. "It's Surge's ship…"

Macro clenched his teeth together and pushed himself to his feet. "That wretched zigzagoon sure is a mood killer."

DL followed him as he stomped his way towards the cockpit. "What's she doing following us?"

"Oh, she just wants to kill me is all." He paused at the controls, noting Surge's smiling tympole on the camera.

"Kill you?" DL gasped. "But she helped you! I thought she was a friend."

"Makin' friends ain't easy when you're in my line of work, sweetheart." He sighed at the smaller ship and shook his head. "Apparently Socket hired her after I did."

"But she's wanted as well, right?"

"Apparently she doesn't care." He nodded to the weapons controls. "Fire back. Blast it into the ocean."

DL clenched her paws together and looked from the controls to Macro and back.

"What are you waitin' for?" he asked. "At this rate, she'll shoot us down first!"

"I can't do that," she said. "She helped me."

"Yes, and now she's trying to kill me!"

DL stared at him for a moment, then let her paws relax at her sides. She approached the weapons and her paws flew over the controls.

"Maybe we can incapacitate her," she said. "Knock her weapons out so she's no threat."

Macro leant on the dashboard beside her, eyes fixed on the tympole as his ship spun around to face it. The familiar whir of Wildcard Gamma's turrets spinning around its hull filled the cockpit, and he watched a stream of bubbles head for Surge's ship. It ducked to the side, narrowly avoiding the bombs. Two of them hit its tail rudder, snapping it clean in two. The tympole spun precariously through the sky until it righted itself at Wildcard Gamma's left side.

"Nice shot," said Macro. "With its rudder snapped, that might slow it down."

"I wasn't aiming for the rudder." DL spun the ship around again to face the tympole head on. "I was aiming for its face."

More bubbles launched forth, but the tympole was unable to dodge. The bombs collided with a missile just as the tympole launched one from its mouth. The two explosives detonated, sending a shockwave that blew Wildcard Gamma back several feet. Macro stared wide-eyed at the smoke. There was no sign of the ship. DL's jaw was slack, her paw still on the weapons controls. Once the smoke subsided, the tympole hovered a good few feet away. Its face was gone, replaced by a hollow, black hole. It made no attempt to go after them. How it was staying airborne, Macro had no idea.

"Well, I think that sorts that problem." He fell into his seat and rubbed his face with a paw. "Let's just get to Botnet."

DL turned the ship back towards Botnet City's blinking antenna. "Can you contact her? I want to know she's okay."

"I ain't contacting a 'mon out to assassinate me, DL."

She glanced behind them in the tympole's direction, but it was well out of their view. With a sigh, she turned back to the controls.

"Then if this is the sort of thing space pirates do," she said, "I'm not sure I want to be one anymore."

Macro leant on his paws, keeping his eyes on Botnet City. That horrible feeling was back, gnawing at his gut. "To be honest, neither am I."

…

Anchor pulled himself out from beneath the dash, choking on smoke. The ship's filters rattled away in a desperate bid to clear it, but the impact from those missiles had greatly reduced their efficiency.

"Good grief, Matrix!" he spat. "What on earth were you thinking launching another missile?"

"I was trying to blow back their attack." Matrix's voice was weak. "Given you refused to do it."

Anchor wafted the smoke aside, trying to locate the ribombee. His ears twitched and he turned to face the dull buzz of his wings. He thought he could make out his tiny form in the far corner of the cockpit, right beside Switch.

"Are either of you injured?" Anchor asked.

"I'm all right." Switch exploded into a coughing fit. He tried to stifle it to say, "But Matrix hit the wall pretty hard."

"I'm fine." Matrix groaned and his wings buzzed for another split second. "Actually, I think I've broken something."

Anchor fought the urge to curse and instead kicked aside the dashboard's cover. "Great, now we're stuck here."

"Why can't we just contact him?" Switch asked.

"Because I ain't been thinkin' straight," said Anchor. "Macro might be a reckless buffoon, but he doesn't normally pull stunts like this. I didn't wanna risk a thorough ribbing off him, but like a fool I've always got his back!"

"So we went after him in his enemy's ship, and fired at him in a 'secret pirate language'," said Switch. "Great plan!" He clapped his wings together, wafting up the smoke enough for Anchor to see his golden eyes.

"I don't appreciate the sass, Switch," Anchor growled.

"Then why not contact him now?" Switch asked. "Tell him it was us! Then he might come back and get us!"

"Because my computer got crushed in that explosion!"

"Mine's fine." Matrix winced as he reached into his belt. "I can contact him."

Anchor slumped to the floor and rubbed his temples. Another cough racked his body, making him desperately wish for a filter mask.

"Oh wait…" Matrix threw his tiny arms in the air. "The battery is dead."

Switch's beak fell open and he fixed Matrix with a look that said 'are you kidding me?'

"Any chance the power still works so I can charge it?" Matrix asked.

Switch sighed and hung his head. "Maybe I can carry us to Botnet City? It's not that far away, and my wing has almost completely healed."

"Flying types can't fly this high," said Anchor. "Atmosphere's too thin. You'll die before we reach it."

He stared blankly at the far wall. The power must have been working somewhere since they'd not dropped towards the ocean yet. One of those thruster ships with the engine in the rear, complete with its own separate power supply. But for how much longer it would last he had no idea. Let alone if it would be capable of charging a computer. He'd probably have to re-route the power to the ship's computers, and none of those were working. If they were going to get the ship moving again, he'd have to get to work. He sighed and pushed himself to his feet. It was going to be a long day.

…

Botnet City. Home to electric type pokemon. A city of entertainment, with its own share of natural greenery. There was very little fruit grown. Most food was imported from towns and cities that could

grow it, mostly Gear Village and Cyan City. The air hummed with static, pushing Macro's fur on end before he even left his ship. He smoothed it back down and glanced at DL who gave him an amused smile. The smile faded away as they checked their weapons and made for the hatch.

"I don't remember much at all about this city," she said.

"Well, I know it quite well," he said. "So I wouldn't worry. Sure you don't wanna wait on the ship?"

"No. I don't want you going in alone. You need backup."

He grimaced but bit back a retort. He'd much rather she was safe on his ship, but he'd already made that clear. "It'll probably be pretty dangerous."

"I can handle it."

He met her chocolate eyes, the warmth melting him. If there was fear there, she hid it well. He took her paw and pulled her into him, catching her lips in his. Her warm body wove around his and for a brief moment he thought about bailing on the mission altogether. Just taking off to somewhere else in System and starting over. But he couldn't do that to her, or to System. The world was relying on them.

He pulled back from her and took a steadying breath. "Then let's get this over with, huh?"

She nodded, smoothing down her fur.

"It says the memory disk is in a safe in the town hall," he explained. "City Governor's office. It'll be a straight in, straight out job. No time to get reacquainted."

"I understand." She opened the hatch.

Macro poked his head out and glanced around. No one was around to see him. No one on the docks, at least not this end of it. His ship was completely invisible to the naked eye, but the cloak drank fuel like water. They'd need to be quick if they were to make it back to Cyan City. He had no desire to tap a government ship for fuel, or use the city's refuelling station. Such feats would not go unnoticed.

They hopped out onto the docks and ducked towards the city dome's entry point. Unfortunately it needed a code. Fortunately, Macro had that code thanks to the dark underbelly of the internet.

Not a pokemon was in sight. No security waiting at the dome. No government soldiers keeping an eye open for invading ships. What was going on? Was Botnet City also under threat from Ultra Beasts and everyone was dealing with that? If so, he desperately hoped he didn't encounter it.

But it was just so… surreal. Not a single pokemon in the streets. Music hummed from entertainment buildings, billboards flashed their animated adverts, the data antenna blinked its red and green lights at regular intervals. But it was broadcasting to a ghost town.

"Why is it so empty?" DL asked.

"I dunno, but I don't like it." He placed a paw on her shoulder and steered her towards the square. "Come on, let's just hope the town hall is just as empty. It'll make our job easier."

Part of him worried everyone would be in the square waiting for him. But just like the rest of the city, it was empty. It made the town hall feel miles away, when in fact it was only a few short footsteps. When he reached it, he expected it to be locked. He got his computer out just in case, but the door opened smoothly under his paw.

Empty.

His jaw dropped. "What on earth is going on here?"

His voice came out as a whisper. An unnecessary whisper. But he feared any loud noise might draw out a lurking mob. He tiptoed across the hall to the town hall's map. The governor's office was on the ground floor, just like in Cyan City. He paced down the hallway with DL in tow, her thickly furred feet silent on the tiled floor. The both of them readied their guns and crouched beside the closed door to the governor's office. Macro nudged it open and slipped inside laser first. A soft ringing reached his ears. His wide eyes flew around the room until they landed on the desk. A tiny chingling sat atop it, eating a sandwich much to big for him. His black eyes lit up when he saw Macro and he lowered his sandwich to give him a wave.

"Hiii!"

DL's eyes narrowed and she lowered her laser. "Tweak!" she hissed.

"Socket's PA?" Macro sneered. "What on earth are you doin' here."

"I'm here to relay a message." Tweak flopped across the desk and picked up a scrap of paper. He cleared his throat as if he was about to give an important speech. "Eggs, paper, ink… Oh wait, this is the governor's shopping list. Hang on." The chingling discarded the scrap in favour of another one. "'Relocate the memory disk to Strobe Street Apartment. Number forty eight.'"

Macro's heart felt like lead. His laser faltered and he stared at the grinning chingling, dumbfounded.

"'Make it easy'." Tweak looked up at him, still grinning. "That was my order." He discarded the paper and winked at Macro and DL. "Have fun! Maybe we'll meet again."

At that, Tweak vanished in a beam of purple light.

Every muscle in Macro's body trembled. He clutched his laser so tight he almost fired off an accidental ground beam at the wall. He placed it back in his holster and steadied himself against the door.

Why that apartment? The wretched gothitelle… what was she planning?

"I don't like the sound of this," said DL. "Why 'make it easy'? Is it some kind of trick?"

"I'd say so," said Macro.

"Then let's leave it," said DL. "I can just relearn my attacks like a hatchling. We'll get there."

"But you want to know what happened to your parents," said Macro. "I can't exactly teach you that."

"No. But I could find out some other way."

"But you wouldn't know them," he explained. "They wouldn't be your memories. Just words from someone else. Didn't you have friends? Brothers or sisters?"

She fumbled with her belt and looked away from him. "I don't know."

"Then… then let's get this disk." Macro turned from the room, keeping his paw on the wall. "Maybe he wasn't lying about it being 'easy'."

"I don't understand why she's chosen this apartment," she said. "Do you think I used to live there or something?"

"I don't know." Macro's pads began to sweat, leaving marks on the wall. He retracted it to his side, avoiding DL's eyes. "You said you were in an orphanage."

"I know. Maybe something happened there?"

Macro stumbled out into the square, his legs turning to jelly. No, it was impossible. He scoured the skyline for the apartment block, clocking it just beyond the square. Then he grabbed his laser again and motioned the pachirisu towards it.

"If anything, she's getting at me," he explained. "I don't exactly have good memories about that apartment."

"Oh?" She turned her head to look at him. "What happened?"

"I don't like to talk about it," he said, getting a disappointed look in return. "Listen, I'll tell you everything once we're out of this place. I just wanna put it behind me. It gives me the heebie-jeebies. And all this eerie emptiness ain't exactly helpin' matters."

Strobe Street was just as Macro remembered it. It opened out onto a park which served as the lone apartment block's garden. Along the street was a club that seemed to exist solely to emulate the street's name. At night a strobe light flickered in the doorway, making anything that got too close also strobe like a badly executed stop-motion animation.

"Well, here we are." Macro approached the apartment's door. "Now to see how 'easy' he's made this."

Before attempting to use his computer to hack the door open, he instead stuck his claws in the side and pulled. The door slid open like a well-oiled machine. Macro's eyes widened and he felt his heart lurch in his chest. So far, things were going ridiculously easy, and he hated it.

"We don't have to do this." DL's soft voice placated him. "It's clearly upsetting you."

"No, I'm fine. We'll be quick. Quick and painless, like a band-aid."

He didn't even need to look at the floor chart. He knew exactly where forty eight was. It was on the forth floor, right beside the back stairwell. If they took the elevator, they'd be there in no time flat.

He called for it, and it came down smoothly. No rattle. Nothing like a Pulse City elevator. No indication it had ever been damaged. The musical chime as it reached them seemed so loud in the silence that

Macro almost leapt out of his fur. DL placed a paw on his shoulder and he flushed, trying to mask his embarrassment.

The mirrored interior did nothing to alleviate the crushing claustrophobic feeling. Already he could smell smoke. Smoke that wasn't there, yet grew in intensity the closer they got to the fourth level. When the doors opened, everything was fine. No smoke. No blackness.

He sought out the door numbers, and groaned when he realised they were at the wrong end of the corridor. Forty and forty one.

The tiled floor was the one thing that was different since his last visit. No carpet. Nothing that can feed a fire. He rubbed his arms as a chill washed over him, and he tried to beat back an intrusive memory. A crying child's voice wailed in his mind and he shook his head violently, trying to dispel it. DL gave him a concerned look, and he realised she'd asked him something.

"Sorry?" he asked, running a hand over the base of his horn.

"I asked if you're okay?" She paused and pointed at a door. "Because we're here."

He fixed his eyes on the door. Open. Why was it open? He gave it a push, revealing a plush room. Definitely not as he remembered it. It had previously been filled with black and chrome furniture, belonging to a male. This clearly belonged to a mother and her family. He shrugged it off, relieved that he wasn't going to be reliving his time here much longer.

The disk sat on the dining table, right beside a plush pichu. His heart lurched into his throat and he snatched the disk, turning away from the plush toy.

"Got it. Let's go." He slipped past DL and out into the hallway.

"So it really was easy," she mused, closing the door behind them.

"Too easy," he said. "I don't understand it at all."

He held the disk between his thumb and index claw, scrutinising it. It looked like any other disk. He leant back against the elevator's glass wall and frowned, turning the disk back and forth. It was locked, just like the others. Deep down he worried it had been infected, and that dread was slowly growing. How was he ever meant to find out without putting DL at risk?

Once out of the apartment, he was glad to have it behind him. He popped the disk into his belt and walked as quickly as his legs would allow towards the docks. Still not a single pokemon in sight. Where was everyone? Had Tweak hidden the entire electric population?

"I'm gonna be honest, DL. I'm worried she's done something to this disk."

DL pawed at her ear and 'hmm'd'. "It was rather too easy. But… you did wonder if it was a way of getting to you?"

"Right now there'd be no better way of getting to me than hurting you." He paused beside his ship, realising what he'd just said.

She shifted beside him and looked out at the sky. "But… she doesn't know that, does she?"

"I dunno." He shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe she does? I have been trying to help you, haven't I?"

"Well it would still be criminal." DL sighed and met his eyes. "You're going to install it anyway. If there's a chance at getting my moves back, I want that. But…" She trailed off and looked away from him, clawing at her ear.

He took her paw and steered her onto his ship. Once they were back in his familiar cockpit, a flood of relief washed through him. That was it. Botnet City would be miles behind them before he knew it. Back to

Cyan City for a drink and a good rest. Unless it was the wrong disk… but after all that, Meta City could wait a day or two.

"Let's set this to auto pilot back to Cyan City," he said. "Then… then we'll install that disk."

It was a safety measure. He didn't know how to pilot the thing, and if DL ended up incapacitated, he didn't want to be left stranded. She said nothing as she coded in the co-ordinates. The ship flared to life, pulling away from Botnet City. Further away from his nightmares.

He pulled the disk from his pocket and popped it into his computer. A message popped up on the screen from Matrix. Probably wondering where he'd gone. That would have to wait until later.

The jack lead was tucked neatly away beneath Matrix's navigation deck. He pulled it out and connected one end to his computer. He had to sit down. His nerves were on fire, making everything tremble.

DL took it from him and loaded up the disk, then connected the jack lead to her socket.

"It's easy," she said. "Matrix just drags everything over. But… promise me something?"

He met her eyes as he took the computer back from her.

"Just…" She stuttered. "Every memory has had its own fair share of shocks since the second disk. I really don't want to be alone."

"You're not alone," he said. "We've never left you alone during this."

She sank into him, and he lifted a trembling paw to her shoulder. Now he understood what she meant. Her claws wound into his scarf, and he looked down at the computer. Such a simple procedure, yet it filled him with dread.

"I guess now isn't a good time to tell you I'm terrified, huh?" he asked.

Silence. Claws digging into his chest. He ignored it and dragged all the information from the disk to DL's internal computer.

She went limp, making his heart leap and stirring up nausea. His eyes snapped to her antenna, but it wasn't doing anything out of the ordinary. That filled him with relief and he let out a sigh as he pulled her into him. Her concerns about the memories made a lot of sense to him now. If she was old enough to remember what happened to her parents, then she might not take it very well. He knew that feeling. When he lost his own mother, he'd not had anyone to turn to. No family. No friends.

The blinking light returned to its normal steady blue glow, and DL came back to her senses. Her claws dug back into his scarf. He trailed a paw over her shoulder and opened his mouth to speak, but her entire body turned rigid. Something collided with his chest, knocking him back into the dashboard. She scurried back from him on her bottom, her chocolate eyes cold and livid.

"It was you!" she screeched.

Macro's jaw dropped. "What?"

"You! You're the one who killed my parents!" She pulled herself up against the door, her entire body shaking. Her tail bristled like a brush.

He pushed himself to his feet and stretched a paw out to her. "Wait… DL…"

"Get away from me!" Electricity sparked from her yellow cheeks, but the sparks trailed behind her and she screamed, clutching a paw to the jack at the base of her skull. She removed the lead and threw it to the floor. "You're the reason I ended up in that orphanage. You're the reason I ended up with her!"

She turned and bolted down the corridor.

Macro sank down against the dashboard, tears pricking at his eyes. It all made so much sense now. Why Socket had sent him to that wretched apartment. Why it had been so 'easy'. A sob shook his body and he lowered his head into his arms. Tears soaked through his fur and he let out a low whine. DL had lived there. And he'd burnt it to the ground.

…

Anchor let out a cheer as the dash hummed to life. He leapt to his feet, smacking his head on the dashboard in the process. He ducked out from beneath it, rubbing at his mohawk.

"Looks like we've done it, guys!" he called to the back of the ship.

Switch scurried out from the engine room with Matrix on his head. The ribombee tapped at his tiny computer.

"Success," he said. "Power is re-routed from the engine, while still providing us with the means to move. The ship now has full power, and Macro still hasn't answered my message."

"Probably in the thick of trouble," Anchor growled.

Switch opened his beak to speak, but Anchor silenced him with a wave of his paw.

"I've had enough of your sass right now!" he said. "If you're gonna keep goin' on about my bad decisions, you can keep that beak shut."

Switch raised a wing. "I wasn't going to give you any sass."

"Then what were you gonna say?"

The talonflame closed his beak and huddled down beside the door.

"Thought so," said Anchor. "Let's get this bag of bolts to Botnet City then, and lend Macro a paw."

He sat back in the captain's chair and steered the ship towards Botnet City. It rocked and swayed as what was left of the tympole's rudder tail strained to push them on.

"I have a bad feeling about this." Switch keeled forward, turning pale beneath his feathers.

"Me too. There ain't no way we're gonna make it in time," said Anchor. "I'd send another message, just in case he didn't hear it the first time."

"Already well ahead of you." Matrix popped his computer away and landed on the dash beside Anchor. "Wow, it feels like we're sailing through the ocean."

Switch dry-heaved behind them.

Anchor sighed and rubbed the bridge of his muzzle. "Come on, Macro. Give us a sign of life at least."

…

Fire. So much fire.

No matter what Macro did, he couldn't clear the image from his head. He huddled against the dashboard, staring blankly at the door, watching the blaze in his mind.

A little voice cut through the inferno, snapping Macro back to reality. "Captain?"

He jerked his head up to meet Cookie's concerned face. The brown slurpuff stood with a tray in his chubby paws, topped with a pink ice cream smoothie.

"I brought you something," he said. "Since you missed lunch."

"I'm not hungry."

Macro let his paws fall from his lap to his sides. His claws brushed his computer and he looked down at it. 'Matrix, 2 messages'.

"Okay, well…" Cookie shuffled his feet. "If you change your mind-"

"I'll tell you." Macro picked up his computer and opened the messages, quickly reading over them. "You have to be kidding me…"

'Hey, Macro. That ship you hit? That was us, you big goof.'

He shook his head as he opened the next one.

'We've got it running again, but it sucks. Come get us.'

Macro pulled himself to his feet, stuffing his computer into his pocket. So he'd almost killed his own crew. He'd almost lost everything… He bit back a sob and turned to the controls. How on earth was he meant to steer this thing? To find them? How far behind were they now? He checked the messages again. The most recent one had only been sent five minutes ago. That gave him some hope at least.

He fired off a message of his own, telling them to look for him. That he was only ten minutes away from Botnet City, in auto pilot to Cyan City. Then he stuffed it back into his pouch and leant back against the dashboard.

Cookie was still stood in the cockpit. Macro fixed one eye on him, prompting the slurpuff to speak.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Yeh. Anchor and the others are in Surge's ship. I almost blew it up." Macro waved a paw at Cookie and moved into the corridor. "Do with that what you will."

"DL doesn't look too good either."

Macro froze in the doorway, not looking back at Cookie. "Yeh well… that's because I killed her family."

Cookie let out a squeal and dropped the tray. The smoothie glass smashed on the floor, sending ice cream everywhere. Macro didn't even flinch.

"Yeh," he went on. "I'm a walking wreck. My past always comes back to haunt me. Now I've hurt her, too."

He shuffled out of the cockpit towards his room. Soft sobs froze him in his tracks and he looked over at DL's door. The knife in his chest twisted. He turned and placed a paw on the panel, letting the door slide open. DL lay huddled on top of the duvet, but her ear twitched at the sound of someone entering.

"Go away," she growled.

"No," he said. "Not until you hear me out."

"Go away!"

She sat bolt upright as she launched a pillow at his head. It bounced off and hit the floor. He flinched. How on earth did a pillow hurt?

"DL, listen to me," he said. "That day you're remembering is the worst day of my life."

"Yeh? Well oddly enough it's not the worst day of mine." She flopped back onto her bed and turned her back on him. "Yet you're responsible for both of them."

"It was an accident. A terrible one!"

"An accident doesn't bring my family back, or take this computer out of my head."

"I know. I don't have the power to change any of that. But believe me, I want to help you."

"And what makes it worse?" She lifted her head slightly and stared at the wall. "I've kissed my parents' killer. The sleazy pirate responsible

for landing me in that orphanage!"

He clenched his paws so tightly his claws dug into his pads. He let out a choked sob and collapsed against the door.

"I had a sister, too," she went on. "Not even a year old. She also died in that fire. And given I had no surviving family prior to that, I am well and truly alone." Her voice broke off and she sobbed into her pillow. "Now go away."

"I'm sorry," he choked.

"I don't want to hear it. Now leave!"

"No! Please, just listen to me!" He sank down to the floor. "I'm not some murderous monster!"

DL didn't answer, but he could see her body shaking as she sobbed silently, curled tightly into a ball. She clutched her thick tail like a comfort blanket. All he wanted to do was scoop her into his arms and comfort her, hating the pokemon who'd done this to her. He screwed his eyes shut and swiped the tears away with the back of his paw.

"You must have noticed other pokemon call me Hunter," he said. "Well, truth is that was never my real name. It was some dumb alias I adopted from the first group of pirates who took me on."

"What's that got to do with anything?" she spat.

"Everything." He paused and wound his paws together. "Hunter died that day."

She wiped her eyes with a paw, but she didn't look back at him. Her ears pricked up, that was enough to spur him on.

"You see, Anchor and I took a job in Botnet City," he said. "Was a weapons raid, someone had tipped us off that Socket had links with a guy who made explosives. Government weapons are like gold in Pulse City, and I was their main supplier. Things never went easy,

but I couldn't turn my nose up at one guy making them in his apartment.

"When we got there, getting in was easy. Simple hack job, broke the door. Same old, same old. His apartment were empty though, and filled with chrome and black furniture. I remember that little detail clearly. Stuffed in his bedroom, or what would have been his bedroom, was a lab full of explosives. We grabbed all we could as quick as we could and made to leave. Three sacks between us. Anchor carried two.

"What we weren't expecting was to run into a heavily armed, almost entirely cybernetic electabuzz in the hallway. No sooner he saw us, he was swinging his mechanical arm about, slicing at me with leaf blades, throwing water shurikens. All stuff electabuzz aren't meant to know. But in this day and age, it's hardly surprising. So we fought back. Dropped the bags, well Anchor dropped his bags, I kept mine on my shoulder and fired my laser with my free arm. I was aiming for his bionic parts. 'Take them out, he can't do anything.' They weren't impervious to my ground lasers, but they kept bouncing off and hitting the wall. Left horrible scuff marks, and some blew chunks in them. That's where part of the disaster happened.

"You see, Anchor was relying heavily on his fire fang. Trying to get in close-"

"Don't you go blaming him for the fire!" DL hissed.

"I'm not!" Macro snapped. "Like I said, it was an accident! Anyway, he couldn't hit the guy with his fire fang. So he tried his gauntlets. Good thing he brought them along, because a few thunder punches and he shorted the electabuzz's main weapon arm. So he retaliated back with a thunder punch of his own. Met Anchor's gauntlet head on. Sparks flew and hit the exposed wires. They overheated and ignited, sparking all along the corridor and burning through the paint. That's when I decided to bail. Fired one more ground laser at his legs and ran.

"I thought Anchor was behind me, but he wasn't. He was still fightin' that electabuzz. He had Anchor cornered against the wall. So I fired again, blowing the electabuzz back. I kinda caught Anchor in the blast. Injured his leg. He grabbed one sack of the explosives and limped after me. But that electabuzz weren't down for the count. He got back up and fired off his other, weaker limb. So I panicked. I fired back and the lasers hit. Water and ground. It's so ironic that they caused a blast that ignited the bombs. Nails flew everywhere from that sack, along with sparks, igniting newly exposed wires. The wall and floor caved in, and that guy's room collapsed. I fell right through to the floor below, but Anchor didn't come with me.

"He looked down at me. Asked if I were okay. I weren't, I'd landed on a sack of explosives that thankfully hadn't blown me sky high. But fire were everywhere. Another explosion came from outside and shook the building. There went the rest of the guy's work. Thankfully not taking the whole place down with it. I told him to find the quickest way out and take it, I'd do the same.

"When I looked around, I were sat in a smoldering pile of rubble. And it was growing quickly. I had to get out, but the window was blocked off by wood and steel. Wires sparked right by it, lighting up whatever they touched. So I turned and ran for the door.

"That's when I grew aware of alarms blaring. Pokemon fled from the apartment. I had to duck back into the room and wait for them to clear. No sense being caught and accused for it all. The floor above me was ablaze now. There was no runnin' to the rooftops and waitin' for Wildcard Beta. No waitin' for Digit to send down the ladder. No waitin' for Anchor to bail me out. I grabbed the sack of explosives and tried to find the most fire-free route.

"It weren't easy. It spread fast along the wires. Fuse boxes exploded. The alarm went off, plunging the place into silence. All the screams were outside, so I guessed everyone had got out. That gave me a lot of freedom to find my own way without getting caught. I tell you, there's little as frightening as clambering through a blaze with a sack of explosives. But I weren't leaving it behind to blow up in the blaze.

Noble or foolish? I think it were the latter. Place was already falling to bits.

"But when I got to the second floor, the stairs were blocked up. Hot fire licked at my fur, reminding me if I climbed through it, I'd go up with the bombs. So I had to find another way. I tell you, I've never been so scared. I never admitted it to Anchor either. Or Digit. As I climbed along a blazing hallway looking for a window, I heard crying. A little kid crying, not an adult. It froze me. I realised I wasn't the only one still in there. Pokemon were trapped.

"I kicked the door down, not wanting to fire off my laser again. It took more than one kick, too. Three hits and I was in, and greeted by thick smoke and intense heat. They'd been two floors below the blast, yet bits of ceiling and furniture lay about the place where it had fallen through. Flames licked down like stalactites. It were like some fiery cave. The crying was louder, and I spotted two pokemon under all that rubble. A raichu, and the tail of a female pikachu. It didn't take a genius to work out the both of them were dead." His voice broke off and he took a steadying breath. "I'd never witnessed that. But I tried to shut it out, find the crying child. I took the room to the right, climbing over a fallen beam. The tiny room was in a better state than the other one, but smoke billowed down from above. And there, standing in a cot-bed screaming for his parents was a pichu.

"I grabbed him under one arm, told him we'd get out of there. He kept asking where his parents were, but I wouldn't let him see the mess. I couldn't. I dropped the sack, grabbed my laser, and blasted a hole into the next apartment. The entire place could've come down, I don't know what I was thinkin'. I suppose seeing your own mother lying dead does weird things to your head. You don't want anyone else to experience the same, especially not a kid barely two years old.

"I grabbed the sack again and, with the pichu under one arm, climbed into the next room. I checked the window - too high up. If we jumped, we'd both die. I needed to get down another floor. So I ran for the door, but before I reached it the floor began to give way.

Flames erupted up from it like a flippin' volcano. I back-pedalled to the window and took another look out. Grass. The park. Teaming with pokemon. Was it really worth jumping two floors?

"I had no choice. I dropped the sack, grabbed the kid in both arms, and threw myself backwards out the window. I heard screams. Yelps of surprise. But I missed the grass by a good way, landing in a pond. I rose up sputtering, nudged aside by a water dweller. The seaking stared at me, questioning. I apologised. Told him I had to run, and could he get the kid to shore? The pichu shouted for me, but I left him. Clambered out and ran as fast as I could out of the park.

"If anyone gave chase, I've no clue. But they knew I were responsible. I wouldn't have been worth forty thousand credits if no one knew. But that's when things really fell apart. Digit told me I were crazy. She left the next day. And I made the decision to scrap Wildcard Beta. Hunter's trademark huntail would fly no more. That were its last mission, and one I desperately wanted to forget." He took in a trembling breath and stared at the window. "But I can't. I don't think I ever will."

DL shuffled on the bed, briefly glancing up at him. "More than twenty pokemon died in that blaze."

"I know."

"I'm glad you thought to rescue Cogs, but that doesn't make up for it."

"I know."

She sighed and rolled back to face the wall. "No one ever mentioned Cogs' mysterious rescuer. Or the seaking. All I know about it is he somehow survived and made it outside when his parents didn't. He kept saying it was a pirate, but no one believed him. Thought it was just childish babble, or that he was traumatised. He ended up at Botnet City orphanage, taking one of the few places left, while I ended up in Meta City."

"I don't expect recognition, I started the flippin' thing."

"Loop spent years hating Hunter for what he did," said DL.

Macro looked up at her, but she still had her back to him.

"Now I don't know," she went on. "I want to forgive you, but I don't think I can. Not right now."

There was that twisting knife again. He leant forwards on his knees and buried his face into his arms.

"I'll stay here until we get back to Cyan City," she said. "Then I'm going my own way. I'll get that last disk somehow, but I won't be accepting your help anymore."

He lifted his head again and wiped fresh tears from his cheeks. "I have escape pods." His voice wavered.

"Huh?"

"I have escape pods," he repeated. "You may as well use them. I'll be scrapping this ship after all this is over anyway. This will be the last job I ever take."

"What are you talking about?" she scoffed.

"I'm saying Wildcard is over. I can't take this anymore. Living in fear and pain."

"Now you're trying to be a martyr?" She gave a single, dry laugh. "I'd say you've brought it all on yourself. Now leave."

He pushed himself to his feet, anger burning inside him. He flashed a canine in her direction and scanned the door open. "You want that pod or not?"

"I'll take it. I guess getting it back doesn't matter since you're 'scrapping this ship'."

He stomped from the room and let the door close behind him. His throat tightened as he repressed a sob and pushed himself towards the cockpit. Right before him flew a huge tympole, struggling to stay airborne. It looked like it had just done a lap of Wildcard Gamma and was preparing to do another one. He muttered under his breath and pushed the button for the cargo hold. The wishiwashi opened its jaws, swallowing the tympole whole. It closed again behind it, and he turned to head to the cargo hold.

Before he reached it, a disgruntled granbull threw the door open.

"What in the world, Macro?!" he snapped. "First you take off, then you take forever and a day to spot us? Or were you just watchin' for… Good grief, are you all right?"

Matrix landed on Anchor's shoulder and leant forward to examine Macro. "Your eyes are all puffy."

"DL's leaving," said Macro. "She's taking one of the pods."

Anchor's jaw dropped. "What happened?"

Macro moved across the loot room to the far side, where two small escape pods waited. There were two on either side of the ship, each one resembling a tiny part of the schooling wishiwashi. The little blue fish were big enough for two pokemon of Anchor's size to comfortably sit in.

Switch shuffled behind him, watching his every movement. "You two looked so happy back in Cyan City. What could happen in only a day?"

"Remember that fire back in Botnet?" Macro asked Anchor. "Well apparently her parents lived in that apartment."

"You're kiddin' me?" Anchor scoffed. "So you got her memories then?"

"Yep. And Socket made it real easy for me by vacating the entire city, and relocating the disk to the very apartment number all of that started in."

"The vindictive little…" Anchor clenched his fists and seethed. "So now she's leavin'… Guess it's some sneaky way of Socket gettin' her alone, huh."

Macro froze with one paw over the escape pod's panel. He hadn't considered that.

"Then there's no way she's going alone." He turned to face his crew, and his eyes fell on Switch. "Could you… would you go with her?"

His voice cracked again, and he bit back fresh tears. No, not in front of his crew.

Switch nodded his head. "Of course. Anything."

Macro took a steadying breath and moved away from the pod. "Look after her then. Make sure Socket doesn't get her wicked paws on her." His voice broke off and he slumped into the wall, wiping away fresh tears.

'If DL still wishes to obtain Loop's memories, then by all means find them… But be warned that chasing down these disks will result in pain for the both of you.'

The memory of Solgaleo's words caused a dry, strangled choke to escape his throat. If he'd known exactly what pain they'd have caused… would he have still gone after them?

"Go and lie down, Cap'n," said Anchor. "We'll sort this out."

Macro waved a paw over his shoulder and slumped to his room. Exhausted, beaten and sore. Fresh tears continued to fall long after he heard the escape pod rattle away.

…

And thus ends Arc 4! Man, that twist was planned for ages. If you would like to see the special episode that covers Macro's heist in more detail, please let me know and I'll post it. There are a handful of specials that likely won't get posted here unless requested.

Please R&R!

Special - The Fall of Wildcard Beta

A/N - I decided to give you the special episode anyway. I was a little late getting around to uploading it. The upside is, it gives me an extra week or so to wrap up Widget's back-story. So… if things go smoothly, that will be uploaded after the next main chapter (although hopefully not over the weekend, so as not to slow things down. Arc 5 is pretty chaotic!)

Special - The Fall of Wildcard Beta

There was a scratch on the hull.

Hunter's lip curled into a sneer as he stared at it. An unsightly blemish in the blue hull of his trademark ship. Not even three years old, and its first real damage had lay at the fin of a drunkard's ship as he'd reversed out of Pulse City's docks. At least, that's what he'd hoped it was. He'd not witnessed it. But it wouldn't be unheard of for a pirate to act out of spite. Seeing the trademark huntail ship with Wildcard sprayed across its left flank would be enough to set off a more envious, less successful pirate.

"Wow," came a familiar voice. "That is quite the scuff!"

Hunter glanced down at a sewaddle who had sidled up beside him, craning his neck back to look up at the ship's wound with his one working eye. The other one had been reduced to a milky white by an everstone.

"Who did that?" Worm asked.

"No idea. I didn't see them." Hunter folded his arms and looked out at the sunset sky filled with aquatic-themed flying ships. "But when I find out I'll be painting over it with their face."

"You might need to fill in the groove a bit, too. Unless you want it to have a scar like you? I mean, it's not over the huntail's muzzle,

but…"

The mawile rolled his eyes and sighed, turning back to his ship. "What do you want, Worm?"

"Oh, nothing much," said the sewaddle. "I've just closed up shop and was on my way to Moonlight Lounge when I saw your ship in the docks. Thought you might like to get a drink?"

"I suppose I could do with one." Hunter kicked himself back from the bollard he'd been leaning against. "But you're buyin'."

"Dang it." Worm flailed his tiny legs and wriggled off ahead of him. "You called me out before I could even weasel you in."

"Hey, I've gotta shell out for some more paint. It doesn't exactly come cheap in this hole."

Hunter kicked at a tin can, sending it over the barrier around the city and into the dome. What remained of its contents splashed out and coated his scarf with a pungent, yeasty froth. His muzzle creased and he beat at it with his paws, but it only soaked into the black fabric.

"This is not a good day," he growled.

Worm stifled a laugh, but a chuckle betrayed him as he continued on through the busy street.

"I guess you now have to shell out for a dry cleaner?" he called over his shoulder.

Hunter shook his scarf and muttered to himself as he followed after the bug pokemon.

Moonlight Lounge rose up on their right and he strolled inside, instantly assaulted by the smell of alcohol and the voices of drunk and excitable space pirates. He scooted to the side to avoid the large foot of an armoured rhyperior and ducked between the legs of

an aggron, keeping his eyes on Worm's small body. The sewaddle had no problems, weaving between feet and bodies like a pro. Before they reached the bar, a loud voice drew Hunter's eye to a crowded booth.

"I've had enough!" roared an incineroar. "I bail! You're nothin' but a dirty cheat!"

He pushed himself from the booth, throwing a rude gesture at an oranguru. A magmortar followed behind him, tossing his cards back onto the table. He waved his railgun attachment between himself and the gorilla pokemon as he stomped off, leaving just the oranguru and two other pokemon at the table. Two dark types. Although the weavile looked rather jittery, staring intently at his cards. The scrafty was incredibly calm and composed in comparison.

Oranguru… Hunter didn't know him by name, but his game was to play and control his opponents moves. Why did pokemon bother to even play? Because they wanted to see if they could resist his tricks. Hunter had no interest in such games. Not since Anchor had lost five hundred credits to the oranguru's little game.

Speaking of whom…

Anchor sat at the bar beside a small buneary. The granbull's eye went to Worm as he wriggled up the leg of a stool and clambered onto the bar counter. He said something to Anchor that was drowned out by other voices, but he looked over his shoulder and beamed from ear to ear.

"Cap'n!" Anchor raised his glass. "I hear you're buyin'?"

"He'd better be," said Digit. "Because I'm all out."

"No you ain't," said Anchor.

"He doesn't need to know that." Digit glanced at Hunter as he climbed up onto the stool beside her. She gave a small smile over

her glass. "Oops."

"Let me get one thing straight." Hunter pointed towards Worm. "I'm buyin' his drink. I pay you two."

Digit tutted and swirled the remaining contents of her glass. "But I blew it all in the market upgrading my laser and getting my ears fluffed."

"Then that's your fault," said Hunter. "'Fraid you'll be on rations for the next two weeks, sweetheart." He waved a paw at the scrafty as he passed by. "Oi! Barkeep!"

The scrafty leered at him and begrudgingly took his order.

Digit sighed and rubbed her finger over the rim of her glass. "Rations, eh? We could really use a chef."

"I can't afford a chef," said Hunter.

"I suppose." She sipped her drink. "I mean, you can barely afford me."

"Hey, I pay you the exact same I pay Anchor." Hunter pointed over her shoulder at the granbull's amused yet baffled face. "And all you do, Digit, is sit in the navigation seat lookin' pretty."

The buneary flicked her ears back and chuckled. "Oh, you cad. I thought I told you to stop that."

"Yeah, well." Hunter shrugged and took his drink from the bartender. "You can tell me to stop all you want. I'll get through to you eventually."

Digit scoffed and nudged her glass back towards the bartender. "Another please. Put it on his tab." She nodded to Hunter who spat out his drink and snapped his head around towards her.

Anchor guffawed and slapped a large paw on the bar repeatedly. "Yanno, sometimes I can't tell if you guys are kiddin' or serious."

Digit cocked a claw towards Hunter. "Getting him to buy me a drink was serious."

"I don't know why I put up with you two," Hunter scoffed.

Anchor laughed again and nudged the sewaddle, causing him to spill his drink onto the bar. Worm stared at it in dismay and shoved his glass towards the scrafty. He looked pointedly at the mawile.

"Another one," said Worm. "Put it on Hunter's tab."

Anchor almost fell off his stool into a hysterical heap.

"You know what?" Hunter slipped from his stool and waved his glass in protest. "I don't deserve this punishment! I'm gonna find a booth and you guys ain't gonna join me."

"Leave the tab open!" Worm called after him.

Hunter promptly closed his tab, paid the bill begrudgingly, and slipped into a vacant booth right behind the poker players. At least… he thought it was vacant.

Two yellow eyes fixed on him from the shadows. He stared back at them over his glass, trying to suss out the shadowy pokemon. They edged along the seat, the dim light reflecting off blue and black feathers. A chatot, his head topped with a tattered musical-note crest.

"I usually like to sit alone," he squawked, as quietly as he could.

"Yeah, well." Hunter put his glass down on the table and folded his arms. "I'd rather like the peace myself right now."

"No other vacant booth?" The chatot waved a wing towards the restaurant doors. "Maybe fork out some cash and get yourself one of

them fancy chambers, eh?"

Hunter narrowed his eyes. "Why don't you?"

"You gonna challenge me?" The chatot fluffed out his feathers, but it wasn't as intimidating as it was amusing. "Oh, forget it." He slumped back into his shadowy corner. "Do what you want."

Hunter sipped his drink, keeping one violet eye on the parrot pokemon. "Hatter, right?"

The chatot waved his wings and shushed him, his eyes flitting in all directions. "Keep it down! They'll mob me!"

"Why?"

"Because they want news." The chatot shuddered and huddled against the wall. "I'm tired. I need sleep."

"Then go fly off to your nest."

"I'm a nomad. I don't have a nest."

Hunter raised an eyebrow and lowered his drink back to the table.

"Stop staring at me," hissed Hatter. "They'll notice me."

Hunter diverted his gaze to the booth behind the bird, but he couldn't help noticing every twitch out of the corner of his eye.

"You could rent a room?" he suggested. "Bricked Inn is the cheapest place I can think of."

"I ain't stayin' there again. Walls are paper thin. 'Oi, Hatter? That you? You in there?'" The chatot shuddered. "They won't leave me alone."

"Well, this is a side of you I ain't ever heard of." Hunter sipped his drink, avoiding looking at the chatot head on. "I'd offer you a drink,

but that would just draw attention to the fact there's someone else in this booth, won't it?"

"Hmm… I actually like the sound of that."

"Seriously? A second drink on the table, right before your beak, won't alert the other pirates that you're sat right there?" Hunter waved a paw towards him.

"Stop gesturing," Hatter hissed. "Look, you get me a drink and put it on this seat right here beside me." He tapped his talons on the leather. "It should relax me enough I can get some shut-eye. You do that, I'll pay you back."

"Pay me back how?"

"Drink first, pal."

Hunter sighed and clambered from his seat. "What's your poison?"

"Aspear cider," said Hatter. "Splash some cinnamon spice in it while you're there."

Hunter shrugged and crept to the bar, staying out of Digit and Anchor's line of sight. The bartender at this end was different. A female dark-furred persian with some kind of spinal adaptation. She mastered the art of walking on two legs, but her movements were ungainly. When she spotted Hunter she purred deeply and leant towards him.

"Well, if it ain't the handsome mawile." She grinned, flashing two sharp canines. "What can I get you?"

Hunter frowned up at her and placed a five credit bill on the counter. "Aspear cider. Splash of cinnamon spice."

Her whiskers twitched with surprise and she straightened to look over his head at the other space pirates. He tapped the counter irritably, drawing her attention into one of his violet leers.

"That's Hatter's drink, isn't it?" she asked.

"Well, now it's mine." He nudged the bill towards her.

The persian tutted and took the bill, pocketed it then turned to pour his drink. "If you're keeping secrets, so am I. No one needs to know a drink's gone unaccounted for, eh?"

"What about my change?" he growled.

She winked at him and popped the glass on the counter, then handed him the cinnamon sprinkler. Her voice came out as a whisper scented with pilfered ale. "Let me keep it and I'll keep my mouth shut that the little chatot is huddling against the wall back there like a scolded hatchling."

Hunter glared back at her then nodded stiffly. Once she'd stood to tend to the next customer, he scattered cinnamon over the cider and carried it back to his booth.

"Ahh, that's the stuff," said Hatter. "Nice 'n' easy now, nice 'n' easy."

Hunter reached beneath the table to set it down beside Hatter. The chatot steadied it in his wings and hid it between himself and the wall.

"Now you hold up your side of the bargain," said Hunter. "Cough it up."

"Psh. Never patient, you space pirates." There was a rustle of paper and something brushed Hunter's leg. He reached beneath the table for it. "I think you'll find that to your liking?"

Hunter spread the paper out on his lap and read over it. A report, complete with Socket's letter heading. No, not a report. A request. An order to a bomb manufacturer who'd set up base in Botnet City. What did Socket want with bombs? Well, Hunter didn't exactly care.

All he saw was a sheet full of credit symbols that nearly caused his eyes to spin like a jackpot machine.

His eye went to the address. Forty eight, Strobe Street Apartment, Botnet City. Apartment? What was a weapons expert doing manufacturing bombs in an apartment building? No, scratch that… what was Socket doing ordering them from such a place?

He hastily folded the letter and stuffed it into his belt pouch. "I'd like to ask how you get your claws on such things, but I guess that's a trade secret, eh?"

Silence.

He looked back up at the chatot. His head lolled to the side against his glass, held close to his body by his wing. A soft snore left his beak, and his eye twitched a couple of times. Out like a light.

Hunter slipped from his seat and grabbed his own glass, turning back to the bar. Anchor and Digit were still there, the latter sprawled out with her head on her arms. Anchor looked up when he saw him and raised his glass.

"Back for another round, eh?" he asked.

Hunter popped his glass on the bar and motioned towards the exit. "Come on, we've got a job."

"A job? But it's night!"

"Crime never sleeps, Anchor." Hunter turned to the door. "You're either with me, or you don't get paid."

Anchor slipped from his stool and nudged the buneary.

"I'm up!" She jerked her head from her arms and looked around. "Wait, what am I doing here?"

Anchor grabbed her wrist and dragged her after him, following Hunter back to the docks. They skidded to a halt as Hunter opened the hatch, but Digit's eye went to the hull.

"Aww man." She nodded to the scratch. "Who did that?"

Hunter bristled but said nothing as he climbed on board. He fell into his captain's seat and kicked his feet up onto the dashboard. When Digit entered the room, he reached behind him and handed her Socket's letter.

"Key in this address," he said.

"Socket's mansion?" Digit gasped.

Hunter rubbed the bridge of his nose and bit back a sigh. "The other address."

Digit clambered into the navigation seat, then the ship lurched and she toppled off over the other side. Hunter snapped his head around to Anchor who mouthed an apology and released the steering controls. He twisted in his seat to look at Digit as she clambered back into her seat.

"Might I request seat belts?" she hissed.

"Sorry. My bad." Anchor raised his paws and turned back to his captain. "I think we should set her in autopilot, Cap'n. I think I had one too many ciders."

Hunter pinched his muzzle in his claws, feeling the onset of a sick stress-headache. "Noted."

…

Botnet City, home to electric types. Even in the dead of night, the city hummed with life, its tall skyscrapers reaching up towards the glass dome. Bright lights contrasted against the black sky, drowning out a majority of the stars. The city hovered to the far east of Meta City,

System's capital, who's pride of place was slap bang in the middle of System Ground. Botnet was a rather quiet city in comparison. More of a family place than a business district. Yet pokemon still moseyed up and down the streets, occupied in their own little world as they travelled back home from late night studying or overtime at the office.

Its docks were fairly vacant, the only ship being a large government trade ship unloading supplies into the cargo hold. Had Hunter arrived during the day, there would most likely have been three or four such ships, but the others had long since left having been emptied of their goods.

Wildcard Beta drifted in beside it, the cloak up. Not a single pokemon heard or saw it, too occupied with lugging huge boxes from the golden ship. Hunter braced himself in Wildcard Beta's exit hatch, hidden safely behind the cloak. Once the pokemon had entered the trade ship once more, he slipped out onto the docks, followed closely by Anchor. Wildcard Beta hung around for a while as the two space pirates ducked behind a metal shipping crate.

Hunter's heart pounded as he kept his ears pricked for the pokemon behind him. Digit had sent over a map for the city well in advance, and he loaded it up on his visor. The location, Strobe Street Apartment, lit up in the chaos of the map. Almost in the centre of the city. That was a fair trek. He leant back against the crate, scouting for the best route. Best being the fastest, yet least inhabited areas. Alleyways, side streets. Anywhere that would avoid busy bars and main roads where he'd stand out like a beacon. Most pokemon would jump at the chance to turn him in for three thousand credits.

He motioned to Anchor to follow him, and keeping an ear on the busy electric types unloading their cargo, he ducked off the docks and into an alleyway.

One thing that always astounded him was how clean rich city alleys were. Not an overflowing bin bag in sight. Everything was neatly

tucked away into skips and trash cans that looked like they received regular cleaning as much as they did emptying.

The alley opened up into a busier road. One that still had commuters trotting back and forth. Many of them had their heads down and eyes on their computers as they sent messages to unseen recipients. Some, however, had their wits about them, and one such luxio sent Hunter back into the alley, unwillingly nudging Anchor back with his horn. The granbull stumbled into a skip and Hunter froze before ducking behind the nearest trash can. The luxio glanced their way, eyes trailing over the alley for any signs of trouble makers, before he gave up and padded down the street, eyes wandering to posters, restaurant menus and venue signs.

Hunter clambered out from his hiding spot, noting Anchor as he wriggled out from behind the skip. He brushed back his mohawk and grunted.

"Not as clean behind there as one might hope." He peeled a soggy sheet of torn poster from his fur and tossed it into the skip's open mouth. "Come on, Cap'n, I can see a break in the traffic."

Hunter muttered under his breath, sticking close to his partner as he dashed across the busy street towards the next quiet spot. The mawile cast his eyes left and right, but the only commuter he spotted was a togedemaru right before he was about to crash into her. The space pirate leapt behind her, causing her whiskers to twitch. She looked up from her computer briefly, then tutted as she muttered something about 'boisterous kids these days', returning to her news browsing.

Hunter let out a sigh of relief as he joined Anchor in the side street. The look on his partner's face told him he should be more careful and look where he was going, but the granbull decided to stay quiet rather than irk his captain. Instead, he nodded towards the cross roads ahead of them.

"Which way?" he asked.

"Right." Hunter pushed past him. "It's not far from here. If we stick to the quiet streets, we'll be in and out before we know it."

"Raids in these flying cities always make me anxious." Anchor kept pace behind him and turned his eyes to the glass dome. "It ain't easy gettin' in and out like it is on System Ground."

"Well, I guess that's one reason Socket's chosen some couch manufacturer to make her explosives then." Hunter paused at the crossroads, checking to make sure the coast was clear. It was. "Puts us off attempting to ninja her."

Their location on Hunter's map overlay blinked along the street as they reached the next road. Strobe Street. A long street that ended in a huge, lush park. One thing about System Sky was that it had grass and berry trees in abundance. Botnet City, however, was more about aesthetics than farming. The park was ornamental, although still very much real. The trees produced berries, but not enough to feed a city. In places like this, a license was needed to pick them. At the edge of the park lay a pond. Home for water dwellers and, much to Hunter's dismay, a fishing spot. Part of the city's income, no doubt. Electric types were the perfect candidates for fishing up water dwellers for meat.

Hunter turned his eye to the apartment block. Huge, towering. As wide as it was tall. If he were to guess, more than five hundred pokemon lived in it. And that was if there was only one to each apartment.

He scurried around to the front of it, relieved to find what appeared to be a main street was a quiet one. One entirely for housing with not a bar in sight. Most families were indoors, getting ready for bed, if not already asleep. He brought out his computer and lifted it to the lock, hacking into the system. Within seconds, the panel beeped and the door rattled open, the right side jamming part way.

Anchor slapped a paw into his face and groaned. "You really need to learn how to do this without breaking doors, Cap'n."

"It would take too long." Hunter put his computer back into his pouch and beckoned Anchor to follow him. "Besides, I got it open, didn't I?"

Anchor said nothing, sticking close to Hunter as he made for the elevator. Fortunately the stairs were the kind that allowed pokemon of all sizes to clamber up and down, but taking them left them both at risk of running into an occupant.

So did the elevators, but at least he could get away faster.

A little chime rang out and the doors hissed open, revealing an empty glass and chrome chamber. Hunter dove inside and brought his computer out again, lifting it to the panel.

"Don't break it," Anchor warned. "I'm not gettin' stuck in one of these with you again."

"I can't promise anything."

Hunter keyed in an override and the lift rose smoothly to the fifth floor. A weapons manufacturer. Making bombs. Three floors from the very top of an apartment block filled with families young and old. What on earth was Socket thinking? He was doing the city a favour. After he'd raided the place, he'd expose the culprit. Botnet's officials wouldn't stand for it, and Socket would likely feign ignorance. Possibly even execute the very pokemon she was paying.

The doors opened just as silently, and the pair stepped out onto a plush carpeted floor. White. Spotless. Everything was immaculate. Almost sterile.

The pokemon they were looking for lived close to the elevators. Close enough to the emergency stairs to book it should anything go awry. Another key panel. Another broken door.

It swung inward, revealing a room decked out with black and chrome. A black leather sofa; a glass-topped coffee table rimmed with black, perched on chrome legs; a modern television set sat on a

black unit with a chrome frame; black curtains blending in with black and white checkered walls and carpet. Bookcase, rug, fireplace…

Hunter shook it off and ducked into the apartment, confirming it to be empty. They'd need to work quickly. Find the explosives, bag as many as they could and get out.

"Found it."

Anchor's voice drew Hunter away from the bathroom door towards the other side of the apartment. The granbull stood aside from the open door into what would have been the pokemon's bedroom. But instead it led into a laboratory. The lack of black and chrome made it feel as though the door led to another world entirely. The lab of some crazed scientist, filled with tables and sharp, glinting knickknacks that could do more damage than good in the wrong paws. Nails and screws scattered about the floor, mixed with plastic and metal boxes alike. Wires, sharp bits of steel, soldering iron, and the sharp scent of metal and disinfectant.

"It's all in here," Anchor called from the back of the room. "Three boxes of various explosives."

Hunter reached into his pouch and dragged out three rolled-up heavy-duty sacks. "Here, bag 'em up. As many as you can."

"Roger."

Anchor shook one sack open and began carefully loading it up with bombs. Hunter crouched beside him, one ear on the door, as he bundled the weapons inside with a little less care than the granbull. Anchor's larger paws meant he could handle more and had two sacks filled before Hunter had finished filling his first one. Anchor took over while Hunter watched the door, one paw on his right laser.

"All right, got as many as we can carry." Anchor lugged two of the sacks over one shoulder. "Grab the other, let's go."

Hunter hoisted the other sack, stumbling slightly under its weight, and followed the granbull from the apartment. But Anchor faltered, causing Hunter to almost crashed into his tail. Before Hunter could open his mouth to berate his partner, his eye fell on a hulking electabuzz. Or what he thought was an electabuzz. His entire body was almost completely cybernetic. Armour coated his legs, cables bulging out as he advanced towards them. He brought up one arm, almost indescribable, and a large blade erupted from it. A leaf blade. He brought it down towards Anchor's face, but the granbull lifted his free arm. The weapon bounced harmlessly off his gauntlet, save for a few sparks from the impact.

If they were going to stand a chance in this battle, they had to take out the electabuzz's enhancements.

Hunter grabbed his laser and fired, knocking the electabuzz back out into the hallway. The brown ground-type beam bounced from his cybernetic parts, scuffing the wall beside him. The mawile tutted, but at least they'd knocked him off his feet.

Anchor bolted from the room with Hunter in tow, but the electabuzz wasn't down. He pushed himself to his feet and shot out a series of water shurikens from his right arm's cannon attachment. Anchor stumbled back to avoid running right into them, but one caught his foot. He yelped, dropping the bombs to free up his arms. He brought his fist around over Hunter's head and struck the electabuzz in the jaw. He staggered backwards, counter attacking with his leaf blade attack. The attack struck Anchor on the chin, sending the granbull careening backwards. Flames erupted in his jaws and he kicked the floor, launching himself back towards the electabuzz. He locked his flaming jaws over the electric type's cannon in a bid to overheat it. But water shurikens erupted from it, blasting him back down the hallway towards the elevator.

"Aim for his weapons," Hunter barked. "Without them, he can't do anything."

Hunter aimed his laser, aiming at the electabuzz's legs as he rushed towards him. The electric type tripped as one beam struck him on the right ankle, then bounced off towards the wall. Rather than a scuff, it tore through the plasterboard to the wires beneath, exposing them. A pity. The hallway had looked so pristine. Hunter's mind went back to the gouge on his ship's hull and a canine poked from his lips as he fired again. The electabuzz leapt right over it, bringing the leaf blade down towards Hunter's head.

The attack struck his horn and he grunted, slumping onto his bottom. The electabuzz brought his arm up for another attack, but was barrelled backwards as Anchor leapt clean over the mawile, rolling away from him in a tangle of limbs. The electabuzz brought up his leaf blade to strike Anchor in an attempt to get the large pokemon off him, but it met Anchor's sparking gauntlet. The electricty shorted out the electabuzz's weapon, rendering it useless.

The electabuzz swore loudly and flipped Anchor off him with more strength than a normal pokemon should have. His other weapon, a mechanical fist, sparked as he lifted it to strike the granbull. An amplifier. A means to strengthen his electrical attacks. Anchor lifted his own gauntlets to counter the attack, the impact sending out a shower of electricity. It danced over the carpet, grounding down to the floors below. But some hit the exposed wires, causing them to sizzle and pop. Small flames erupted from them, rushing along the wall in a neat criss-crossed pattern. The heat ignited the plasterboard, eating away at it as the wires continued to overheat. A siren began to ring out, throwing the entire apartment into a panic. Voices reached his ears and below them he could hear pokemon stampeding down the stairs. Those on their floor cast one glance at the warring pokemon amongst the flames and turned towards the other fire exit. Had they recognised Hunter through all that chaos?

No, there was no time to worry about that. The fire was spreading too quickly on a floor filled with explosives, eating up the carpet in a desperate bid to consume everything. They couldn't stick around for much longer. Hunter fired one more ground laser at the electabuzz's

legs, shattering the armour and sending the electric type slumping to the floor.

"Anchor, move it!"

Hunter turned and bolted towards the elevators. He pushed the button, and the door opened immediately. Not a single occupant would opt to use the lift with a fire burning away at the walls. He looked back, ready to bellow for Anchor to get a move on, but the electabuzz hadn't given up. He stood awkwardly on his damaged leg, using his shorted weapon to pin the granbull up against the wall. Flames licked at Anchor's canines as he snarled at the electabuzz, looking for a way in to deal some more damage and free himself. Above his head, fire ate away at the plasterboard, spreading rapidly as heat travelled along the wires. If Hunter were to guess, the heat had been too much for the safety fuses to handle. Or they'd failed. Either way, if they didn't get out soon, they'd become trapped in the growing inferno.

Hunter swore under his breath and fired off a ground laser, knocking the electabuzz back from Anchor. The granbull roared and staggered back as the laser skimmed his leg. But he didn't berate Hunter. The mawile scurried back to him, asking if he was okay, eyeing his wounded leg. But the granbull just grunted and motioned towards the elevator. He grabbed one sack of the explosives and limped past him, putting as much distance between him and the electabuzz as he could.

Before either of them could reach the elevator, the electric type was up. Aiming his weaker limb. The thunder punch amplifier. Flames roared from the wall, sending down flurries of plasterboard burnt to cinders. It only served to make the electric type appear more sinister than his sparking, damaged components already made him. But it wasn't electricity he threatened with. A water laser erupted from a nozzle above the fist, and Hunter panicked, firing a ground laser to fend off the attack as they desperately tried to flee. The tiles beneath the carpet had cracked in the heat, crunching beneath Hunter's feet

as he leapt back from the colliding lasers. Water and ground. Yet the explosion was enough to ignite the remaining sack of explosives.

The entire building shook as shrapnel went flying. Nails tore away the plaster, exposing the sparking and flaming wires beneath. The weakened ground gave way, taking most of the explosives expert's apartment with it. But not without claiming Hunter. He fell down to the apartment below, grunting as his back struck his own sack of explosives. He braced himself, gritting his teeth together. Dreading the following explosion. But it didn't happen. Just the sirens, the roar and crackle of flames and the pattering of shattered tiles and wooden beams raining down around him. Smoldering wood bounced off his head, and he swatted it aside with a paw.

"Cap'n!" Anchor roared.

Hunter craned his neck back, looking up into the granbull's worried face. Anchor coughed and wafted smoke from his face, then leant further into the hole.

"Are you all right?" he called.

"Yes, I'm fine." It was a lie, but the last thing Hunter needed was Anchor worrying about him. "Find a way out and call for Digit. I'll… look for another way, I guess."

He clambered from the sack as Anchor confirmed his orders, vanishing from the gaping hole. Hunter took a moment to look around. The room was a mess. Black and chrome furniture lay haphazard about the room, crushing what remained of the apartment's previous decor. Smoke assaulted his senses and he choked, waving it away from his face. Not that it did much good. Flames ate away at the walls, spreading over the laminated floor. The rubble he'd landed amongst smoldered like coals, the main culprit for the smoke. His eye went to the window, but it was blocked off by heavy wooden beams and the remains of the electabuzz's chrome-framed book case. Resigning himself to the potential fate of

a fiery maze, he tiptoed around the broken glass of the coffee table and made for the door.

That's when Hunter became hyper aware of the sirens. They'd been blaring for a while, but at that moment they seemed deafening. Coupled with the screams and shouts of the building's occupants. He ducked back inside the apartment and waited for the pokemon to pass. His heart hammered in his chest as his eye went back to the floor above them. A floor still filled with bombs. Flames licked down from above him like an upside-down volcano, spitting out smoldering wood to add to the kindling. The floor above him was blazing, and it was spreading.

If he went out there, the inhabitants would see him. Know it was him who'd caused it. Maybe the bolder pokemon would try to drag him along and turn him in. He could hold his own, but it was meant to be a quick and easy mission…

Once the commotion outside had died down, he threw the door open and stepped out into a blazing hallway. Another tremor shook the apartment as the explosives above him went off, and rubble rained down outside his vision. The opening created a back draft, blowing him down the hallway. Flames licked his fur and he yelped, scrambling out of them towards the stairs. They felt miles away. Right at the other end of the corridor. He spotted the retreating tail of an emolga vanish beyond the double doors before they swung back into place, trapping Hunter with the flames.

He fled towards it, heat soaking through his horn, disorienting him. He shook it off, but his head was already beginning to throb. He didn't do well in heat, no steel type did.

Once he was through the door, cooler air caressed over him. Then he spotted the open window. Four floors up. He couldn't survive that. He'd have to take the stairs.

Half running, half stumbling, he bounded down the stairs, the sack of explosives crashing against his spine with each leap. Twice he

almost crumpled beneath the weight. His eyes glanced the floor numbers as he passed them. Three. Two…

A wall of heat blocked his way and he faltered, staring down into an inferno. When did it reach the second floor? He turned to the window, but flames cascaded down from the crumbling plaster around it. His heart hammered against his ribs as he looked back at the stairs, warring with the desire to flee or leap through the blaze. Then his mind went to his load. If he leapt through that, he'd go up with the bombs. He shook his head and fled through the double doors onto the second floor hallway.

Heat. Fire. Climbing down from the ceiling and travelling along the wires. Heating up the steel parts that formed a majority of the building's structure. If they were even as hot as his head was beginning to feel, it was little wonder the place was ablaze. He scurried through the hallway, checking doors finding each one locked. A window. He just needed to find a window. Two floors. Surely a fall that distance wouldn't kill him? A broken bone or two, sure, but he'd survive. He'd survived worse.

Then crying reached his ears.

He faltered by a door, straining his ears against the sirens and roar of fire. A sob. Words. A child. A child? His heart plummeted. There wasn't seriously a child locked in there?

He took a step back then launched a kick at the door, but bounced off it. What was it made of? He considered throwing an iron head, but an action like that in this heat would probably knock him unconscious. Instead, he threw another kick. Then another. The door splintered, plastic and wood, as he stumbled through it. Right into a wall of heat. Flames licked down from the ceiling like fiery stalactites. The whole room was like a cave of fire. The crying was louder, to his left. But his eye went to the rubble. The entire ceiling above had caved in, bringing the room above them with it. Two bodies lay beneath it. He spotted the heart-shaped tail of a female pikachu poking out from beneath wooden beams and a burning sofa. Beside

her lay a raichu, his head buried in the rubble. He tore his eyes from it and turned towards the bedroom. Crying. Frantic pleas for his mother.

Hunter gave himself a mental shake, berating himself for what he was about to do. He'd not wanted to run into anyone, and now he was running to the rescue. Practically handing his life away. But he couldn't leave a child to die in that fire. Not a fire he was responsible for. He'd gone for the bombs. He'd fought back against the electabuzz. It was his laser that had exposed the wires.

He stumbled into the bedroom, his violet eyes fixing on the terrified face of a pichu. Probably not even two years old, standing in a cot-bed. His tiny paws gripped the bars as he tried to pull himself out.

"Mummy?" he whimpered. "Where's mummy?"

Hunter died inside.

He rushed to the child and hoisted him with his free arm out of the cot-bed. Then he turned to the window. Smoke and fire barred his way, alongside the teetering end of a bed. His eye went to the ceiling and his heart skipped a beat. It bulged under the weight of furniture where the beams had cracked and burnt away. They could go back the way he'd come in, but… He tried not to think about the pichu seeing his parents. Crushed under the rubble. Getting the answer to his incessant, terrified question.

"Where's my mummy?" the child sobbed. "Daddy? I'm scared…"

"Don't worry." Hunter dropped the sack and reached for his laser, keeping one eye on the ceiling. "We'll get out of here. Just hold on."

He fired, blasting a ground beam straight through the wall to the apartment next door. The dust had barely begin to settle as he grabbed the weapons and launched himself though the hole with the child, gritting his teeth as he braced for the bed to finally fall into the

room. But it didn't. He glanced back, stunned, then pushed himself to his feet. Still cradling the pichu in his left arm.

He backed up towards the window, wary of the flames slowly eating away at the curtains and wall. The park was below them. He could see the pond, not too far from the window. A fair leap, totally manageable. But if he missed it… then there was a chance they'd both die. It was too much of a risk, especially if he wanted to spare the kid's life. No… he needed to get down another floor.

He rushed towards the door and stumbled as the ground gave way. Flames erupted up from below it like a volcano, blocking all access to the door. Then he heard the bed finally give way. Crashing down into the pichu's bedroom, shattering the cot-bed as if it were made of toothpicks. The tiny pokemon screamed, soaking Hunter's scarf with his frantic, terrified tears. Tiny claws dug into the mawile's flesh.

The window it was. He dropped the sack, clutched the pichu to his chest in both arms, and leapt backwards from the window. Glass shattered against his horn and snagged his fur. The pichu screamed. Screaming for his parents. Kicking his legs against the space pirate's torso. Then water cascaded around them. Cool water. Obliterating the heat from his horn in a dizzying frenzy. He almost sank to the bottom, still clutching the writhing hatchling.

Then something nudged him. Pushing them back to the surface. He opened his eyes and met the worried face of a seaking. The fish pokemon looked between the space pirate and his charge, then to the burning building.

Hunter spat water from his mouth, gasping as he gulped down clean, cool air. Then he met the seaking's eyes. "I'm sorry."

"What for?" the seaking asked.

Hunter said nothing, pushing the pichu onto the seaking's back. The tiny pokemon gasped for air, his breath wheezing. His yellow fur was still peppered with grey.

"Please… get him to shore," said Hunter. "Save him."

The space pirate kicked himself across the water, rushing towards the berry bushes. Surely pokemon had seen him. Knew it was him. Knew he was responsible and were braying for his blood.

"But what about you?" the seaking called.

Hunter ignored him. He fled through the bushes, keeping his ears open and casting glances to the commotion. Yet more sirens. Ambulances. Fire patrol. Their emergency blue and red lights strobing across the busy street. Water gushed towards the flames, driving them back. Drowning them out. He reached up a paw and brought up his visor. It failed. His heart sank. Stranded. Pokemon glancing his way. Pointed claws.

Several advanced towards him and he instinctively reached for his laser. Another explosion drew their eyes back towards the crumbling apartment block as the final sack of bombs succumbed to a fiery fate. The very room he'd leapt from caved in, sending down a rain of rubble.

Then the dome cracked, shattered, blown apart by a freezing beam of ice. Wildcard Beta's ice laser. The neon ladder drifted down towards him, and he heard Digit's voice in his ear. Slightly distorted from the heat damage.

"Hunter!" she screeched. "Grab the ladder! Now!"

He didn't even need telling. He leapt towards the neon rung and found himself whisked away as the occupants of Botnet City watched. Looking between him and the blazing building. Looks of terror and anger on their faces. He remembered the thunderbolts. The ones that missed, and the one that struck him just before Digit reached out through the exit hatch and dragged his stunned body back on board.

He also remembered her face.

…

"I can't believe you!" Digit roared. "What did you do?!"

Hunter flinched at her words, cowering back on his bed as the buneary marched back and forth. It had been a painful hour. She'd worked in silence, tending to their wounds as she bristled with rage. A long, painful silence. The medical kit she'd been tending him with lay discarded at the foot of the bed. Anchor didn't look much braver, either. He stood in the doorway, occasionally glancing out of the corridor.

She pointed a claw at him. "Oh no. Don't you think you're leaving."

The granbull lifted his paws. "Wouldn't dream of it." Then he added under his breath, "It's less scary standing right here."

Digit had heard it. She frowned and turned back to Hunter.

"That apartment block is reduced to a hollowed out shell!" She tugged her ears and growled. "What happened? How did it…? What did you…?"

"It was self defence," said Hunter.

"So you keep saying. But I can't see how an attempt at 'self defence' causes a blazing fire and three separate explosions!"

Hunter had nothing to say. He hugged his arms around himself and turned his eyes to the window.

"It were an accident," said Anchor. "Sparks flew and ignited some exposed wires-"

"How did the wires get exposed?" asked Digit. "Because I doubt an apartment in one of System's wealthiest cities-"

"It was me." Hunter's voice drew her attention back to him, but he couldn't meet her eye. "I fired. I tried to disarm him. The beam

bounced off his armour and tore a hole in the plasterboard. It was me, all right?"

Digit's arms fell limp at her sides. Her eyes narrowed and she shook her head slowly. "You fired?"

Hunter shrugged and closed his eyes.

"You fired while carrying three sacks of various, unknown bombs?!" she snapped. "In an occupied, residential building?! Hunter, they've counted thirteen bodies so far. And they've not even gone through the entire wreckage yet! It's still burning! It's still dropping to bits! One of the fire 'mon got crushed in the falling rubble!"

Hunter flinched. He already knew all that. It's not like he'd not had the news site open for the past hour, monitoring the damage.

"I've put up with your reckless behaviour, Hunter," she spat. "For two whole years. Stunts of bravado, running into jobs guns blazing. The trigger-happy mawile who, somehow, manages to make most other space pirates look bad at their jobs! Pulse City's main gatherer of weapons! Taking on any job that pays well. Well, bravo." She clapped slowly. "You've got one sack of explosives to pawn off over at Worm's stall tomorrow." She paused and folded her arms, fixing her eyes on the window. "Pity I won't be there."

Hunter snapped his head around to look at her. His jaw went slack. "What?"

"I bail." Digit threw her paws in the air. "I've had enough. I can't put up with this. Every job you take has me worried sick. Not just for your sake, but for everyone else's, too! And I think today has confirmed one of my worst fears. In fact, no… I never actually thought it would get this bad." She waved a paw to his computer. "'Hunter. Now wanted for forty thousand credits for a suspected terrorism attempt on Botnet City. One of System's finest meat suppliers.'"

He groaned and let his head fall into his paws. Of course it would say that. Every pokemon across System knew of his attempts to draw pokemon away from slaughtering the water dwellers in the name of meat.

"I'll be dropping off at the next suitable stop," said Digit. "Unfortunately that happens to be a fair way away from where I'd like to go. But I can always hitch a ride towards Meta City."

Hunter looked up at her, but she avoided his gaze as she stormed from his room. He caught Anchor's eye and swallowed back a lump that threatened tears.

"I'm sorry, Cap'n." Anchor shrugged his shoulders. "But we can't force her to stay."

"I don't want to." Hunter leant forward on his knees and turned his attention to his pocket computer screen. "I guess I deserve this."

"Don't talk like that."

"Just let her go." He waved a paw at Anchor. "She'll need you to let her off. Where is the next stop, anyway?"

"Seed City."

"Oh, of course." Hunter rubbed the bridge of his nose. "A city of fairies. Convenient, eh?"

"What do you mean? You're as wanted there as you are anywhere."

"Convenient because it's where we built Wildcard Beta." Hunter fixed an eye on him. "And it's where she's gonna fall."

Anchor raised an eyebrow and let out a confused 'eh?'

"Hunter is no more." The mawile flicked off his computer screen as the death toll confirmed two more. "Makes sense to scrap my trademark ship."

"So what are we gonna do? Abandon our life as space pirates?" Anchor scoffed.

"Of course not. I'd be a dead 'mon walkin'." Hunter turned his head to look Anchor in the eye. "We'll build a new ship. Start a new life. And you, along with everyone on this ship-"

"So just us two, then?"

Hunter shot him a sneer. "We'll find a new navigator. But from now on, it's Macro."

"You're reverting to your birth name?" asked Anchor. "I thought you hated it."

"Well…" The mawile smoothed out his scarf over his legs. "Macro didn't kill fifteen pokemon and counting."

Anchor nodded stiffly. "Very well, Cap'n. I'll be in the cockpit ready to let Digit disembark."

He turned and limped from the room, leaving Macro to return to his computer and watch the death toll slowly rise.

…

Twenty three. Twenty three pokemon confirmed dead in the blaze.

Macro stood back as he watched Anchor pull apart Wildcard Beta. He didn't want any of its scraps. Its engine. Its shell. Nothing. Every piece would be turned in for credits. They'd already found a buyer. A pawniard living just outside Seed City. He owned a scrap heap that salvaged parts, and practically panted when Macro turned over his ship. At least he wasn't panting for the mawile's life.

Not like the rest of System.

Thankfully, the charges against him had been altered. No more a suspected terrorist attack. Instead, he was wanted for arson and

monslaughter. Clearly Socket had thought it better to alter that little accusation, for fear of sending System into an uproar. To her, his attempts would have been obvious. Get to the explosives before they reached her. She knew his line of work. Knew he stole then sold government weapons across System, primarily to Pulse City. Why cause a panic when she could just as easily sugar-coat the truth? A failed weapons heist gone awry. Leave herself out of the picture, and point the claw at the other culprit. The electabuzz, who, unfortunately, had died in the explosion. Unable to say his piece.

A bitter taste filled Macro's mouth as he watched the two pokemon dismantle his ship. Not because he missed it. After what had happened, it would be wrought with bad memories. He tore his eyes away and looked down at the schematics for his new ship. Like Wildcard Beta, he and Anchor had designed it together. The new one came with a hidden message. A new life. Teamwork.

A schooling wishiwashi.

Complete with spinning turrets that fired off an explosive bubble beam, just like his huntail the new ship would leave a mark in the skies. And hopefully not a destructive one. He sipped at his hot cocoa from his flask and looked up at the two pokemon. Something had caught their eye. Someone scurrying around… inside his ship? He pushed himself up and plodded towards it.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"You've got a lodger." The pawniard pointed a claw into his ship. "Happens a lot in my scrap heap. But this one is a particular nuisance."

Macro poked his head inside the ship. Cowering by the cockpit was a small, brown slurpuff.

"Keeps climbing inside things," the pawniard went on. "Took me two days to get him out of an old shipping crate some space pirate wanted to buy off me."

"So he doesn't have a home?" Macro turned back to the slurpuff. "Is that right?"

The slurpuff shook his head violently. "Don't kick me out! Please! I… it's so… big out there…"

Macro stared at him, formulating an idea in his head. A negotiation. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"You want shelter, then fine. I can offer that." He waved a paw at the inside of his ship. "This is being scrapped. No ifs, no buts. I need the cash, and you're currently stoppin' me from gettin' it. I need the cash 'cos I gotta fly. We're building a new ship. If you want shelter, you can join my crew. You wanna be a space pirate?"

The slurpuff shook his head. "No. Not at all. Space pirates are way more scary than…" He fixed an eye on the pawniard.

"All right, so you don't wanna be a space pirate." Macro rolled his eyes. "I'm selling this ship. What do you want to be? An engineer? Cleaner?"

"A chef." The slurpuff tugged at his fluffy fur, avoiding Macro's eye. "I want to be a chef. My mother was a chef. My father was a chef. My grandfather-"

Macro raised a paw, silencing him. "I get the idea. You're from a long line of chefs. Well…" He chuckled and leant against the doorway. "I actually could use a chef."

The slurpuff looked up with a start.

"The offer's there." Macro waved a paw and turned to leave. "Take it or leave it."

"I won't have to fight?" the slurpuff asked. "I won't need to be a space pirate? I won't have to… talk to any…?"

Macro looked back at him and shrugged. "You're talkin' to me, aren't you? Besides… how can I have a chef who won't even speak to me?"

The slurpuff began to tremble from head to tail.

"What's your name, kid?" Macro asked.

"C-Cookie."

"Cookie, eh? Can you make pancakes?"

The slurpuff nodded so quickly his berry bobbed back and forth. "Yes! Yes! I love pancakes. With chocolate sauce, and berry coolie, butter, jam, sugar!"

"Good. So do I."

"Will I get my own kitchen?" Cookie squeaked.

"Kid, you'll get your own room! Just please, let the good pawniard do his job!"

The slurpuff leapt to his feet and followed Macro off the ship. Then there was a squeal, and Macro's leg felt very heavy. The slurpuff had wrapped himself around it, burying his face into his fur. At first Macro thought he was just incredibly happy. Then it struck him. It was fear.

"He always does that."

A new voice. Macro looked up to spot a ribombee sitting atop the huntail's fin. A small computer lay on his lap as he wound an antenna in his left paw, eyeing Cookie curiously. Unlike Cookie, the ribombee didn't look homeless. It was more than likely he'd fluttered out of an apartment window when curiosity got the better of him.

Cookie turned his trembling head towards him. "Matrix?"

"It's agoraphobia," the ribombee explained. "A fear of wide open spaces. He likes to hide in things, and doesn't like busy places. I've tried to get him to play games with me but… he doesn't like the arcades. So sometimes, we compromise." He buzzed into the air, tucking his computer back into his pouch. "I'll go and get a barrel."

With that, he was off into the scrap yard.

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All being well, we'll be back to regular uploads from next weekend. Please R&R! =D

Chapter 64

A/N - Widget's back story is all written up and ready to go this week. I'll try to post it mid-week to avoid disrupting the flow of main-story uploads. Arc 5 is planned to be the last arc (although I am still working on it and anything could happen!) It's full of action and surprises, and I really hope it doesn't disappoint.

Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows!

Part Five - Terror

Chapter Sixty Four

It had taken BackDoor several days, but he found it. Just what he was looking for. A powerful pocket in time and space, one that radiated promise. The other ones he'd found had paled in comparison, throwing out large and impressive Ultra Beasts that hadn't held up to the hoopa's standards. None of them had listened. None of them could speak. Or if they could, they didn't speak any language he knew.

Hopefully whatever resided on the other side of that pocket would be able to understand him.

He removed the hoop from his left horn and span around in a quick, wide circle. The pocket opened instantly, glowing golden around the rim. The ultraviolet mist pulsed with energy, flickering and strobing off the hoopa's metallic shell. Something moved in the mist, growing larger until its shadow took shape. Huge wings spanned out from its long body, its movements similar to that of a seviper. Then it lurched forwards, bursting from the pocket in a flash of ultraviolet light.

BackDoor keeled backwards, keeping his eyes on the creature. It was like nothing he'd ever seen. Grey and black with red highlights,

ornamented with what looked like a solid gold harness over its neck. Each wing split into three. No legs to speak of, just spikes along the side of its body. And it didn't even flap its wings. It just floated there. Staring at him through a pair of tiny, red eyes.

BackDoor let out a thoughtful noise as he swerved to the side to get a better look at the creature. It copied him, keeping its eyes on his. But as it moved, its body seemed to distort as though it didn't quite belong in System.

"Not like the others," he said. "You've got a funny mist trailing you."

"What did you call me here for?" If the creature had a mouth, it didn't open it to speak.

BackDoor jolted with surprise, then broke into a gleeful giggle. "Oh boy! You speak!"

"Of course I speak," the creature hissed. "Now what did you call me here for?"

BackDoor shrugged. "Oh, just fun. I'm bored. Bored of looking for a new world for this world's mayor to flee into. So I've been playing with Ultra Beasts."

"Ultra Beasts," the creature repeated. "What are Ultra Beasts?"

"What you are, of course!" said BackDoor. "Weird creatures from another world." He mused for a moment, looking the creature up and down. It distorted again, and he thought he saw a leg. "No idea what to call you though."

"I have many names," the creature said. "Griseous, The Altered One, The Banished Beast. Some even call me Giratina."

BackDoor waved a mitten paw. "Then I suppose I should come up with something better. But I've just been throwing guesses at these other beasts. Most recent one I named Assembly 'cos it were made

of bricks that stacked one by one when it appeared. Thought it were never gonna stop. So… what do you do exactly? Other than… change shape, clearly."

The creature hissed again, but BackDoor couldn't tell if it was out of anger, frustration, or just because 'why not?'

"I distort things," it said. "Distort time and space to my own liking. If that destroys worlds, then so what?" It twisted its head around to take in its surroundings. "I've been stuck in the Distortion World for centuries. I'm not familiar with this world. What is this place? It's so empty. Did I destroy it?"

"System Sky." BackDoor swerved onto his back and tucked his paws behind his head, keeping both eyes on the creature. "Miles above System Ground. Floating cities, flying ships… you know the math. So… Distorting things, eh? I like it. I think I'll name you Distortion."

The creature seemed to think about this, then shrugged. "Show me this 'System'."

Before BackDoor could reply, the creature dived at him. A grey mist surrounded the android's body, and he let out a mechanical scream as something invaded his processors. After the mist settled, he rubbed his eyes. The creature was gone, yet he could still feel it around him.

"Oi!" he yipped. "Where'd you go?"

'It's hard to move in this world of yours.' The voice hissed inside his head. 'So I'll use your eyes and body as my own. Move.'

BackDoor grinned and let out a chuckle. "Kinda like Symbiont. All right, where do you wanna go first?"

The creature didn't answer. Instead, BackDoor found himself plummeting towards System Ground.

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The little shuttle rattled towards the ground, losing altitude at a steady pace. Switch, having never controlled such a vehicle, left everything up to DL. But he really wished the machine was in his own hands. He cowered beside her, feeling every small movement she made against his feathers. Oh, how he wished he could just get out and fly. Carry her with him and get them both to safety, to leave the tiny wishiwashi escape pod to crash down on the mountains far away from them.

The Backbone Mountains were growing closer, their snowy peaks rising out of the clouds. As the shuttle slipped through them, mist surrounded it briefly before the ground came into clear view. DL dragged the steering stick towards her, levelling them out. The wheels touched ground and it lurched, bouncing along the uneven surface until it came to a smooth and steady stop.

She took in a shaky breath and brushed the fur between her ears out of her eyes. "Here we are."

Switch grunted and shifted uneasily. "Sheer mastery of mechanical wings."

"Let's move. I'm itching to get off this thing."

She clambered from her seat and shimmied past him to the door. He didn't hesitate. As soon as he was standing on sturdy, rocky ground, he spread his wings wide and embraced the open air.

"Oh boy!" he said. "Fresh, mountain air! No ship! No cities! Oh, what freedom feels like!"

DL shuffled away from him and he snapped his eyes back open, fixing them on her back.

"DL?" He gave a little flutter to catch up with her. "Where are you going?"

"Getting a better view."

Her eyes were still red and puffy. She cast them down the mountain slope to the village below. It wasn't one Switch recognised. But after a thousand years, things can change drastically. She looked up and let out a trembling sigh.

"I've no idea where Meta City is from here." Her voice wavered and she pawed at her ear.

Switch tucked his wings in at his sides and looked over at the vast landscape. "If it's still in the same place it was in my time-line, I could fly you there in a couple of days."

DL lashed out at a small rock with her foot, sending it skittering down the side of the mountain. Then she fell to her bottom and let out a frustrated groan.

"I've no idea where it is!" she snapped. "Besides, it's not like I can just waltz in there and have her hand me the disk back, is it?"

"We weren't expecting it to be easy," he said.

She toyed with a few stray stalks of grass growing through the cracks in the rocks. "I have no memories of my family. Just that they'd died in that blaze. I wasn't even there, Switch. I was at a friend's house, we were studying. Then I saw the news… saw the flames in the distance…" She wiped a paw over her eyes and wailed. "Why did he do that?!"

Switch settled down beside her, keeping his wings to himself. He wasn't sure whether or not she'd appreciate a bird-hug, and he wasn't willing to risk upsetting her further.

"Listen," he said. "I don't know all the details. Just what little Anchor could tell me before he went to get you. But… as terrible as it is, it was an accident. He didn't do it to be vindictive."

"But it's the principle!" she snapped. "Why fire off weapons in a freakin' apartment building? And while there are pokemon living in it… asleep?! So many died in their sleep!"

Switch closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I guess it depends on who fired the first shot."

She scoffed and looked away. "That sounds like something he would say."

"I don't agree with firing explosive weapons and lasers in an occupied building," said Switch. "But for the sake of self defence… what was he meant to do? Just let the guy kill him?"

DL looked up at the clouds and blinked back tears. "No… but he shouldn't have been there in the first place." She paused and toyed with her belt. "Neither of them should. I don't think anyone even knew someone was manufacturing bombs in the building."

"Those could have gone off even without Macro's help."

DL visibly flinched at his name. "Don't talk about him. Stop talking about him!"

Switch raised his wings and nodded. "Okay. Okay. Let's… let's just get to Meta City. Get that disk back."

She sobbed heavily and her head fell into her paws. She huddled up, wrapping her tail tight around her legs. "I'm sorry…"

"What for? You're hurting. I'd understand if you threw rocks at me."

"No… I shouldn't be lashing out at you." Her shoulders shook and she choked back a sob. "I'm torn… between the way Loop feels for him, and the way DL feels for him. Loop hates him, but she's me. They're both me." She looked up, fixing tearful red eyes on his. "Have you any idea how confusing that is for me?"

Switch swallowed and licked his beak, diverting his gaze to the horizon. "No… I really don't. But it sounds like torture."

"It's like I'm being torn in two." She wiped her eyes on her arm. "I just want to get those memories back. Maybe then… maybe then I can sort out my head."

"Well…" He shuffled, ruffling his feathers. "You might not be DL anymore. You should prepare yourself for that."

"At least I won't be torn in two."

He was silent for a moment, gazing down at the village below. What do you say in these situations? He couldn't very well tell her to just pull herself together.

"Shall we head to Meta City then?" he asked.

"No, I want to just sit here for a while."

He nodded and stood up, spreading his wings wide. "Do you mind if I take a quick flight? I could do with a stretch."

"Do what you want."

He looked back down at her, ready to tell her he'd only be a minute or two. But her head was back in her arms, her shoulders shaking with silent sobs. No. He couldn't leave her. He sat back down and ventured a wing on her back.

"I can't get… Loop's hatred… out of my head," she said. "The image of those flames glowing in the dark… the venom she felt when she heard it was Hunter… I even remember some of the drawings. Horrible, vengeful drawings of Wildcard Beta shot out of the sky. Then Gamma when he upgraded it. Just burning…"

Switch's mouth went dry. "Would it help if you just saw him as part of the catalyst that started the fire?"

"No. Because I just keep seeing him as the blazing torch." She lifted her head to take a breath. "I want to forgive him, but I can't. Because he's the reason all this happened. That day, my life was set to end. And it ended in Socket's claws. It never would have if that fire hadn't happened."

"Yes, but he's trying to help you get your life back," Switch explained. "See it as some kind of surprise redemption. A way of him fixing something that… from what Anchor's told me, he just can't get over?"

She shook her head sharply and hid it back in her arms. "I can't… It's too hard. I'm warring with five years of pent-up hatred. That's not something only a mere couple of weeks can fix."

"But you got to know him. Before you got those memories back, did he seem to you the kind of pokemon to deliberately hurt others?"

She said nothing. Just silently kept her head hidden in her arms. With a sigh, Switch rose to his feet again and spread his wings.

"I'll be back in a minute or so," he said. "Don't go anywhere."

Silence.

He gave one last glance at her before rising into the air. All the tension and emotional weight left his body the higher he rose into the sky. Then he let himself drop, swooping down the side of the mountain. A flick of his wings brought him up again until he levelled out, gliding over the village. Sparse greenery surrounded it. Where once there was a forest, there was now a large mall. Flickering lights competed with the antenna. What was left of the river coalesced in a mucky lake. A huge, chrome water wheel churned the lake towards a factory he guessed either filtered it out, or used it as some kind of 'green fuel'. He turned his tail on the unsightly mess and returned to the mountain, taking in the clean air and what was left of the woods that had previously dotted the mountain side.

Something roared above him and he froze mid-flap to turn his head towards it. A large, black and green object hurtled towards him. He let out a squawk and flapped his wings frantically, flying backwards before turning tail and skyrocketing towards the ground. The object rushed past him, blasting him with hot air. He dropped, landing in a crumpled heap mere feet away from their escape pod.

An almighty crash followed the anomaly, then a earsplitting screech as it came to a halt over the jagged rocks. He pushed himself up, groaning with the effort. Oh, his poor body. That would leave a bruise. He tucked his wings into his sides and looked over at what had just knocked him out of the sky.

A ship, shaped like a pyukumyuku. A space pirate ship?

DL poked her head out from behind the escape pod. He hopped over to her and followed her gaze to the ship.

"Thank goodness you're alright," he whispered to her.

She shook her head and shushed him, pointing him towards the ship.

The door clattered open, and a disgruntled scrafty staggered out of it. He gave the contraption a kick, denting the tin sides. He hopped backwards clutching his foot in both paws and cursing loudly. A skuntank followed him, tailed closely by a figure that caused Switch to let out an involuntary yelp. A human girl, dressed in stereotypical pirate clothing. She folded her arms and frowned at the ship, looking it up and down. A decidueye joined her side, sandwiching her between a goldeen in a goldfish bowl, held up on mechanical legs. If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he'd have thought someone were telling him a crazy bedtime story.

"Well, it got us over the ocean at least," said the skuntank. "Otherwise we'd all be swimming to shore."

"I wanted it to get us to Meta City," the scrafty grumbled. "Now we're stranded in the mountains with no way to get any repairs!"

"I can harvest some scraps," said the decidueye. "You lot can camp out here and enjoy the clean air."

The human sniffed a couple of times then looked up at the sky. "Oh yeh! They sky's not yellow here."

"No, it's not, dear," said the skuntank. "Because this mountain is actually out of bounds. We're not even supposed to be in it."

"Aye," said the scrafty. "Rumour has it Socket's goons wait at the bottom and shoot anyone who tries. A barrier surrounds the place. Dunno what good it does. Photos surface from time to time on conspiracy sites."

"Drones," said the decidueye as he counted his arrows. "I think I'm set. I'll be back by sunrise."

They watched the decidueye fly away down the side of the mountain.

"So what do we do?" asked the goldeen. "Camp in the ship?"

Switch ventured from his hiding spot and cleared his throat. The rag-tag group looked up at him with identical expressions of surprise. For the scrafty, it melted into rage. The others, however, didn't seem to know what to make of him.

"Who are you?" the scrafty snapped. "One of Socket's soldiers here to kill us?"

"No! I don't want to do anything to you." He neatened out his wings and smiled. "I was wondering what happened to your ship?"

The scrafty snorted and opened his mouth to shout something else, but the skuntank silenced him by pushing him back into the ship. There was a clatter as he stumbled backwards over the ramp.

"We were shot down by space pirates," she explained. "We're actually not in the pirate trade."

"We're a rebellion!" the goldeen quipped.

"That's right, little fish!" said the human. "Time Archeops, here to fix System!"

The skuntank waved her paws and shushed her. "Don't just go announcing that to strangers!"

"Why?" the human asked. "It's how you spread a rebellion."

Switch cleared his throat again and took a cautious step towards them. "A rebellion? Against Socket?"

"The very same," said the girl.

"And might I ask… Time Archeops?"

The girl nodded again.

"Are you… like me?" He raised his talons, displaying his watch.

She stared at it curiously, raising an eyebrow. "Why would I be like a watch?"

He pushed the button, expanding out into his human form. The skuntank staggered backwards, dropping a small, purple creature onto the ground. It shot into the sky, keeling away from him. The girl stared at Switch, aghast, while the goldeen let out a very boyish 'Cool!' In contrast, a 'What the jack?!' came from the ship.

The girl pointed at him, ignoring the frantic squeals from her skuntank companion. "So let me get this straight. You're a human too?"

Switch folded his arms and winked. "Exactly. And did you get pulled through a golden ring?"

A look of disappointment crossed her face and she slumped back against the ship. "Dang it! I thought I were the only one!"

"The name's Switch." He offered a hand to her.

She stared at it, then looked up at him. "What kinda name is that?"

"One I adopted when I came to System. What's yours?"

"Annie." She took his hand and shook it, then wiped hers down on her top. "So you turn into a bird? So do I. An archeops."

Switch's jaw dropped. "I've heard of you."

"Well I ain't heard of you."

"You were in a mental ward."

She smirked and spread her arms wide. "Well not any more! Annie is flyin' free!" She glanced a the ship and her arms fell to her side again. "Well she was."

DL shuffled over to Switch's side, winding her claws together. She looked over the pokemon and Annie, taking each one in. Annie stared down at her and stroked her chin.

"Who's the squirt?" she asked.

DL stuttered, then reached for her laser. But she didn't draw it. "You said you're heading to Meta City?"

"We were," said Annie. "But we crashed, see?"

"Well… what if we offer to help fix your ship?" DL asked. "You can use parts from our pod. Then… could you take us with you?"

"Hey! Little squirt's in on our rebellion!" Annie grinned. "What about you, Switch? You in?"

"What, me?" He sighed and threw his arms in the air. "Oh, what the heck. Macro was gonna go and knock Socket off her high horse anyway. If it'll get me home, count me in."

The scrafty scrambled back out of the ship and pointed at Switch. "You said we can use your pod for parts?"

"Yeh, be our guest," said Switch. "It's rather small for us all to fit in, and it rattles."

"Sounds like it'll do the trick then." He nodded towards the small, lone wishiwashi. "That it? I'll go help myself."

The skuntank looked at each of them and caught the purple creature as it drifted back down towards her. "That's rather generous of you. Although I'm not complaining about breathing clean air. It's much better up here than in the outskirts." She tucked the creature beneath her tail then let it fall across her back. "Do either of you want to help me gather lunch? I think that will be a good chance for us all to get acquainted."

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The gang is starting to come together ;) Please R&R! =D

Special - Widget

A/N - This took a fair while to write. I did it in bursts, and given my pantsing writing style, it wasn't easy as I've had to fix a few inconsistencies in my editing process XD hopefully none remain!

Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! I hope you enjoy visiting Widget's back story!

Special - Widget

N0ize grumbled to himself as the air buffeted him through the cracked windscreen. Cyph3r didn't appear as bothered, casually steering the sharpedpo ship through System Sky with the intention of finding somewhere to stop for repairs. Besides the incineroar's grumbling, the ship was silent, the only other noise the unsettling rattle of the engine.

Tracer sat huddled in a corner beside Widget, the latter toying with a laser module that had rolled out of a small cupboard. The door still hung open, shaken off its catch after the battle with the pyukumyuku. Tracer eyed the module cautiously as though it might set off an array of attacks should the eevee bop it any harder than he already was doing.

The delphox shifted uneasily, glancing around at the wrecked ship. His eye wandered to a fine crack in the ceiling and he opened his mouth as though to query how long it had been there. Instead, he stood up and dusted down his trench coat.

"Pardon me," he said. "I'm going to use the rest room."

"Back of the ship." N0ize waved a paw behind him without even glancing over his shoulder.

When Tracer had vanished out of earshot, the large incineroar finally twisted in his seat to look over the back of his chair, his eye going from the rest room door to the eevee still batting the laser module between his paws.

"Might I ask," N0ize half-growled, "what a fine rogue like yourself is doin' hangin' around with a posh city shamus like him?"

Widget cocked an ear and glanced at the space pirate out of the corner of his eye. "Why not?"

"You're a criminal, ain't ya?" N0ize asked. "You have that air about ya. Not many 'mon could just venture into Pulse City like you did and pawn off a government ship without even flinching at the sheer thought of the consequences."

Widget shrugged and watched the laser module skitter from his right paw to his left. "I don't really care for Socket. So why wouldn't I sell off her ship in favour of a better disguise?"

N0ize roared with laughter and struck a large paw on the dashboard. "That's what I mean! You ain't some cold blooded detective, kid. You've got 'shady' written all over ya." He gathered himself and wiped a tear from his eye with one claw. "So. Spill it. What landed you workin' with the fuzz, then? You payin' back for your transgressions? Or just tryin' to not lose your tiny life?"

Widget lifted his head to look him in the eye. He'd stopped batting the module back and forth, holding it under his left paw. Before Annie's ship tore a hole in his window, he'd been keeping Tracer and Widget around out of curiosity, but since then his demeanour had changed. Part of Widget thought he blamed them for the human's actions. No… he fully thought that. The space pirate had threatened them, and the eevee wasn't entirely sure he wanted to spill his life story to a 'mon who'd threatened his friend.

He looked back down at the floor and recommenced idly swatting the laser module back and forth.

N0ize twisted back towards the window and tutted. "Fine. You don't have to tell me nothin', I was just curious."

Widget rolled his eyes.

"Can't blame a 'mon for bein' curious," N0ize went on. "I just don't see the fascination in stickin' around a 'mon who could just as easily trade you in for some credits."

Although… Widget frowned at his paws. It might actually change the space pirate's opinion of his friend. Help him see Tracer in a different light. He looked up at the back of the incineroar's head, then cast his eyes over to Cyph3r. If the magmortar was interested, he didn't show it. Moments ago, they'd been trying to shoot down another ship regardless of the lives on board. Now all they cared about was repairing the damage done to their ship, even if it meant wringing the two detectives from ear to tail to get a single credit out of them.

Widget ran the scenario over in his mind. Telling them his reasons for sticking with Tracer might actually serve to be a decent experiment. See if the two space pirates actually had a heart between them.

"All right." His voice drew the incineroar's eye back to him. "I'll tell you why. But it's a long story, so you might get bored."

N0ize shrugged and tucked his paws behind his head. "We've got time. It's a long way to the Analogue Isles."

"Analogue Isles?" Widget squeaked.

N0ize grinned from ear to ear.

Widget cleared his throat and regained his composure. "Fine. But you're putting my entertainment skills to the test here. Want me to use shadow puppets?"

"Do whatever you want." N0ize waved a paw and turned back to the windscreen. "But I don't appreciate the sarcasm, or mockery to my intelligence."

Widget chuckled and turned his attention back to the module. Then he began relaying the events of his life.

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I was a sickly pup. Always had my mother worried and doctors running back and forth. See, I was born with a rare degenerative bone disease, and an immune system that even the clean air of Meta City could wreck havoc on. Somehow, I managed to survive until I were twelve years old. But things weren't looking to get any better for me.

One day, the doctor made a house call for the last time. He took one look at me, ran some tests, then pulled my mother aside for a 'private chat'. Well, I might have been on my death bed, but I could still hear a pin drop. I remember it clearly. Four words that reduced my mother to tears.

"He won't see dawn."

After he'd gone, mother cried. Silent tears rushing down her face as she told me everything would be okay. Lies, but I appreciated it. Then she vanished from the room. I could hear her on the phone, talking to her friend. I knew her friend. He was round in a heartbeat.

I was exhausted. I barely remember his visit. Tracer, a delphox from the outskirts. I always remembered the smell of his cigars as he told me stories when mother had to work. Kept by my side, making sure I had everything I needed. This time, there were no such stories. He helped her bundle me into my wheelchair and pushed me out of the house. I didn't see much, my eyes were too tired, and I could barely move my head. But I remember seeing her pink ribbons fastened around the handle as she wheeled me along Meta City's streets. Silently walking beside Tracer as he puffed on his cigar.

"Where are we going?" I managed to ask, voice barely a whisper.

"To someone who can help." That was all she said.

I should have seen it coming. Being shoved through Central Meta Hospital's rotating doors, and the chaos that followed. Staring eyes, my mother arguing with the receptionist and the doctors. The looks on their faces as they tried to calm down a crying and screaming sylveon. Then they did it. They took me away, leaving a nurse furret and Tracer to comfort my rapidly calming mother. I remember her tearful eyes, watching me as the doctors whizzed me away on a stretcher. Tracer placing an arm over her shoulder, whispering that everything would be okay.

Lies.

I don't remember much after that. Everything went dark as various pokemon rushed about me, fastening things to my body. The next time I opened my eyes, it was bright. Unbearably bright. Something was very different. I could breathe freely. No breaths followed by a racking cough. No coughing up blood. No chest pain. The air smelled - tasted - felt clean. I took a few deep breaths as I blinked the dazzling light away.

The first thing I saw was the face of an ursaring staring down at me. His lips were pulled down in a frown until he saw me come to. Then he beamed from ear to ear. A happy beam. One that said whatever they'd done appeared to be a success.

"Welcome back," he said. "It's been a long week."

A week? I tried to push myself up, something I'd not been able to do in over a year. For some reason, I felt like I could do it. But my limbs still wouldn't obey. They felt heavy, tired, sore.

"What happened?" My voice was oddly stronger, despite the croak from being asleep for so long.

A nurse rushed to my side, holding a cold cup of water to my lips. She wouldn't let me gulp it down. I had to take steady sips while she instructed me to be careful in case I made myself sick.

"You've had very complex surgery," the ursaring explained. "It will take a long time for you to recover from it, but when you do, you'll be stronger than ever."

I frowned. "What surgery? Mother couldn't afford any surgery…"

That's right. Brush aside any misconceptions you have about 'rich 'mon livin' in the cities'. Rich city medicine is exactly that. Expensive. Not available to all. It doesn't matter if you live in the city or the outskirts. Living in the city is basically paying premium prices for clean air and healthy food. Mother worked six days a week in a bakery, selling fresh baked goods to commuters. Once her stock was out, she closed up shop. It were enough to get by. The surgery she'd wanted me to have… it cost almost half a million credits. We didn't have that kind of money.

"Don't worry, I'll explain everything." The ursaring pulled up his Clipboard and sat down heavily beside my bed. "You've suffered from a degenerative bone disease your entire life. The first thing we had to do was replace your entire skeleton with a biologically safe mechanical one. Lightweight, but you'll notice the difference. All your muscles have been structured to it, but due to them being underdeveloped, you'll need a lot of rehabilitation to get used to moving with it. The next thing we added were filter valves to various main arteries and your heart. These will remove all toxins, bacteria and other nasties from your blood stream, given you lack the white blood cells to deal with it. A lot of damage had been done to your lungs, so they've been enhanced to state of the art biomechanical implants that can filter out the air. The final addition is an everstone. The drawback to all these medical procedures is that you definitely won't be able to evolve. But evolution isn't everything."

I blinked, speechless. They'd basically turned me into a cyborg. It was what my mother had wanted and more. There was no way she

could have afforded all that.

The doctor lowered his Clipboard and smiled at me. A warm smile. "It might sound like a lot to deal with. But it's saved your life. You'll live to see… oh… a good seventy or so more years yet."

"What about my mother?" I asked. "We can't afford this."

"It's been dealt with, don't worry." The doctor rose to his feet. "She's waiting to see you, actually. She's visited whenever she could, and her friend, too."

He left the room, stepping aside to let someone in. But the look of surprise on his face told me something was amiss. The pokemon that stepped inside wasn't my mother. It was Tracer, and he didn't look happy. Probably because the ursaring took his cigar away and waved it at him in a silent scold. The delphox watched him leave, then plonked himself down in his seat.

"You're looking well," he said.

"Where's my mother?" I asked. "He said she was waiting-"

Tracer waved a paw to cut me off. "She's had to work today. So I've visited in her stead."

"But I've just woken up! I thought she'd-"

"It was unexpected." Tracer reached into his inside pocket for a cigar, then froze, frowning at the 'no smoking' sign. He sighed and let the tin fall back into his pocket. "Widget, I don't want to be the one to tell you this. But your mother has to make a lot of money very quickly. So she's working every chance she can get."

"A bakery reels in nutpeas," I said. "And pokemon only want to eat when they're hungry."

"She should really tell you all this. Not me." Tracer placed a paw on my shoulder and a look of surprise crossed his face. But he didn't

say anything about it, just reached into his pocket for his computer. "So what story do you want today?"

The fur bristled along my spine and I flashed a canine at the wall. "Forget your dumb stories!"

"Widget!"

"They don't matter!" Tears streamed down my cheeks. "I'm not even supposed to be alive right now! I should be dead, but they've turned me into some cyborg freak!"

"It was your mother's request." Tracer's voice was like a calm amongst a storm, yet it just kept raging.

"We couldn't afford it! And now she's not even here!"

"She's not stayed away out of spite," said Tracer. "You're everything to her, and seeing you deteriorate has been hard! After your father left-"

"Don't you dare mention him."

Tracer lifted his paws. "Okay." He was silent for a moment, twiddling a cigar he'd absently pulled from his pocket between two claws. "But look at it this way. Once you're out of here, you'll be able to help your mother out."

"When will that be?"

"Given your enhancements, you might make a speedier recovery than any ordinary pokemon."

"Okay. How long would an 'ordinary pokemon' take?" He'd stood up. I could barely turn my head to look at him. All I saw was his pocket and bushy tail swaying anxiously behind him.

"I've no idea," he said.

Holding my head up even a fraction was too much strain. I flopped heavily back onto my pillow, and it hurt. I groaned and tried to bury my face into the pillow.

"So where does she work now?" I asked.

Tracer was silent for a moment, chewing on the end of his cigar. "The bakery. It's doing well."

Lies.

"I'll be back tomorrow," he said. "I'll tell your mother you're awake, and awaiting rehabilitation exercises."

"Why can't she come herself?" Something was up. I could smell it. Hear it in his voice.

"I told you. She's very busy."

Before I could press him any further, he left the room.

…

The next two weeks went by slowly. Doctors pushed me into rehabilitation, getting me to push against weights to build up my muscle strength. Once I was able to move my legs slightly, they had me walking on a slow treadmill to build up the strength in my legs. They held me over it in a harness, more as a safety precaution in case I lost balance or collapsed.

Between rigorous exercises, Tracer visited. I never saw my mother, not once. But I smelled her if Tracer moved fast enough. Wafting from his fur amongst the tobacco smell. There's no fooling my nose. It wouldn't have surprised me if something were between them, and I still don't know to this day. I've never asked, and I don't want to either. They were good friends, I knew that much. He kept saying she had to work, but something was definitely up. She wouldn't have

just abandoned me to the hospital, sending her friend to visit in her stead.

One day, when I were standing properly on all four legs, I told him that. I shouted at him. Threw myself at him and tackled him to the ground. I don't know what got into me, but I do know I'd had enough. I wanted to see her. To know she was okay. To let her see for herself that I was okay. He grunted as he lifted me off, struggling to move me. With the knew skeleton and all those enhancements, I was about three, maybe four times the weight of an average eevee.

"Widget, listen to me," he said.

"No!" I snapped. "You're lying! Since you first visited me two weeks ago, all you've done is lie! You think I can't smell my own mother on you? If she can't visit me, then how can she visit you?!"

"She needs to visit me," he said.

"Why?!"

"Because she sold her house and business!" Tracer flashed his canines, then sighed into his paws. "I'm sorry… I didn't want to worry you…"

I stared at him, speechless. All I could do was blink as I took in his words. She'd sold everything? Everything, to pay for my life?

"I'm so sorry, Widget," he went on. "But can you see why I didn't say anything sooner?"

"No." I couldn't even look him in the eye. "No, I can't. You should have told me! Where is she now?"

"Living with me."

I blinked again, staring at his face. Mouth pulled down in a frown, eyes watery.

"Why?" I asked. "We live in Meta City…"

He shrugged and leant back on his paws. "She can't afford to. And she needs to live somewhere. I offered her a room until she can make enough to rent a house in Spool City."

Spool City… I really was rendered speechless this time. There was no way she could survive in Spool City. The air there was toxic even to steel types. A fairy type wouldn't survive a year.

I had to get her out.

I fixed Tracer with a leer, the fur bristling down my spine and turning my tail into a brush.

"You should have told me," I hissed.

"You're right." He pinched the bridge of his muzzle in two claws. "I should have. I'm sorry."

"I don't want to hear it." I swished my tail, pulling my ears back. A deep, threatening growl left my throat. "Go. I don't want to see you again."

His eyes widened and he lifted his paws towards me, but I lunged at one, grabbing it in my jaws. I bit so hard I tasted blood. He snatched it back, cradling it against his chest.

"Widget," he gasped. "I know you're upset, but… I can't do that-"

"I said go!" That's when I tackled him. Knocking all the wind out of his lungs. He rolled into the hallway, and he stared back at my glaring face as the door swung shut between us.

That was it. No more visits from the detective. No more word from my mother. No one knew where she was except me. Holed up in Spool City with an old friend, breathing toxic air. All while I recovered in the hospital until one day, they finally discharged me.

No one to pick me up. No one to take me home. A young eevee, not quite into his teenage years, sat in front of the hospital, the sirens of ambulances coming and going blaring in his ears.

Alone.

I choked back a sob and pushed myself to my feet. I didn't really know the city, yet I managed to find my way back. The little house beside its bakery. The shop was boarded up with a renovation sign in the window. 'Soon to become a bistro', it promised. The house with its little yard and picket fence had a young rattata playing in it, kicking a ball against the wall. He didn't look at me. But the sight of him playing there, in my old garden, made me feel very… very alone.

As I idly sauntered through the city, I found myself at the gates separating Meta from the outskirts. Spool City was the one sign posted, the exact one my mother had moved to. Two pidgeot stood on guard, their beaks encased with metal sharper than their own beaks, their talons kitted out with cleavers. Even their wings had wicked claws to 'give them an extra edge in battle'. They didn't look happy to see me.

"Where do you think you're off to, kid?" one of them asked.

The other clicked his plated beak in a manner that was very threatening, and for a moment I thought about running back home. Only I didn't have a home to run back to.

"Looking for my mother," I said. "She's moved to the outskirts."

"Leaving behind her whelp?" the first one snorted. "I find that hard to believe."

"Look, kid," said the second. "Any who move to the outskirts… stay in the outskirts. So that means…" He pointed a wing at me. "You shouldn't be living here."

"I didn't move to the outskirts," I retaliated. "I've been in the hospital for the past four months!"

The pidgeot exchanged glances and the second one muttered, clearly not intending me to hear, "Couldn't even afford it. Had to sell up, eh?"

I bristled from head to tail, but all he did was roll his eyes and laugh.

"Go on." The first one stood aside and waved a wing to the gates. "Go find your mother. But be aware, you move there… you don't come back. We don't want their filth trampled all over our streets."

"What about the detective?" I snorted. "He comes and goes."

"Some 'mon have special passes," said the second. "They know our routine. We can't let just anyone frolic back and forth as they please, can we? We'd be overrun with scum. Now off with you."

Muttering under my breath, I passed through the gate, but not without firing a leer at the two pidgeot over my shoulder… meeting one off the second, harsher guard.

The putrid air from Spool City assaulted me immediately. Yellow and disgusting, hovering over the buildings like a dense mist. I instinctively coughed, but I didn't need to. It didn't get to my chest, but the smell alone made me feel sick to my stomach. I crept along the wide road, Proxy Boulevard, eyes drifting over the buildings. I had no idea what I was even looking for. No address to go off. Someone moved out of an alley ahead of me and I immediately felt lighter. Another pokemon. Someone I could ask for directions.

I skipped towards the squat pokemon. A trubbish, rifling through the gutter and pulling out various pieces of indescribable garbage. It popped one in its mouth and my stomach churned. I swallowed back the urge to be sick and put on my best face, strutting confidently towards the poison pokemon.

"Excuse me?" My question drew surprised eyes from the trubbish, which narrowed into slits. "I'm afraid I'm a little lost. Do you-"

"I'd say!" the trubbish scoffed. "You look way too manicured for this hole. You want Meta City, do a one-eighty, kid." He twirled a dripping limb in a circle, prompting me to go back the way I'd come.

I frowned and shook my head. "Oh, I'm not going back. My mother moved here, and I'm looking for her. She's living with a delphox called Tracer."

At that name, the trubbish's mouth dropped, then snapped shut again as he growled. "That detective scum?!" He fired off a string of profanities that had me backpedaling up the street. Then he threw his arms back and launched a flurry of slime globules at me.

I leapt to the side, narrowly dodging two of them. The third struck me in the face and I fell into a sprawl on my back. Hard. The impact took the trubbish by surprise, long enough for me to clear the gunk from my eyes and see him lurching towards me. I sprung to my feet and threw myself at him, knocking him back into the alley. We rolled in a tangle of limbs until we crashed into a wall. The impact cracked a few bricks, sending debris raining down on us.

The trubbish struggled free of my grip and pushed himself up. He fixed his eyes on me, a wary glare, as I climbed back to my feet. Save for a few dirty scuffs and a slimy face, I was reasonably free from any injury. The trubbish, however, sported a nasty tear in his side. Blood and goop leaked into the alley and he pawed at it helplessly.

"You…" He flashed two rows of jagged teeth. "What are you? Some kinda super eevee? A runt like you shouldn't be able to tackle like that!" He turned and scrambled from the alley. Then paused and pointed a greasy limb at me. "You'll regret this, runt! We'll all be after ya!"

I snorted, sending a slime blob to the floor, and turned on my heel. Since I was in the alley, I might as well go through to the other side. Give the trubbish a wide berth. The alley ended at another road, narrow in comparison to the boulevard. It was dotted with boarded up buildings. A few houses stood looking vacant, although I spotted a dark-furred meowth in one window. No sooner had I seen them, the blind flew across, separating us.

One little house seemed to stand out from the rest. It stood between a shop selling general wares and a club with a neon sign. The animation was somewhat jarring, the image glitching at random intervals. But it got its purpose across, and was one I'd be staying well away from.

There was no telling who was in the house, but it seemed rather out of place between a shop and a club. As though whoever lived there might actually own either business. I was about to turn my tail on it when the door opened. A delphox strolled out, his trench coat billowing in the light breeze. He clutched a cigar in one paw and his filter mask in the other, but he dropped the latter to the ground in favour of lighting up his cigar. His eyes almost bulged from his head when he spotted me, and his cigar dropped from his claws into the gutter to be washed away in the thick, brown muck. A small look of remorse crossed his face, then he looked up at me again as I plodded towards him.

"Well…" He cleared his throat. "I will admit I was actually on my way to Meta City look for you."

"Don't bother," I said. "Where's my mother? I've come to take her back."

"She doesn't have anywhere to stay in Meta City," said Tracer. "And neither do you."

"Then we'll live in an alley until we find our feet!" I looked around at the yellow smog, torn posters, filthy drains. "Living in Meta's streets is better than the hovel you've got her holed up in!"

Tracer narrowed his eyes and reached for another cigar. "This 'hovel' is one of the cleanest buildings in all the outskirts."

I snorted and opened my mouth to retort, but he cut me off with a wave of his paw.

"Unlike most homes," he said, "it has a working air filter."

"Yet here you are in the streets unwilling to wear a mask," I snorted. "It's little wonder you're alive!"

"You aren't wearing a mask yourself, Widget."

"I don't need one," I said. "I've got my own filters, thanks to my mother selling everything to pay to have it done! Now let me see her and take her home, before I take her by force!"

I rushed at him, but something jammed my limbs. The trubbish's sludge bomb? I looked down to find I'd been lifted off the ground. Tracer held out a paw, his eyes glowing with the same purple light that encased my body.

"I don't want to hurt you, Widget," he said. "Not while you're still recovering. But mark my words, you assault me again and you'll meet a force to be reckoned with."

"What? Proxy Prison?" I spat.

"If you're lucky." He dropped me to the ground and I grunted with the impact. "I'll let you see your mother, but she won't be going back."

"Why not?"

Tracer sighed and puffed out a stream of smoke. "I suppose you'll see for yourself."

He twirled with a flourish and threw open the door to his office, letting in the putrid air. I followed after him, acknowledging the air filter in the wall before me. Useless, given the front door couldn't even keep

the air out. It rattled as one half of it worked in reverse to clear the room of bad air.

I glanced around at what appeared to be an office. A little desk stood to my left, and before me lay a worn out sofa.

Tracer motioned for me to follow him. Another door led deeper into the house. A kitchen stood on my right as he led me up the stairs to the second floor. Four doors, one open leading to a bathroom. Given the size of the house, I guessed one of the remaining doors led to a storage closet. He threw open one of them, leading into a sparsely decorated room. A floral scent washed over me, a real blessing after the stench of outside. I spotted the culprits atop a desk. Small, colourful bottles filled with perfume. Sprawled on the bed was a sylveon. My mother.

"Pebi," said Tracer. "Look who's here."

She lifted her head, and her blue eyes lit up when she saw me.

"Mum!"

I skipped across the room onto the bed, nuzzling her soft fur. Her ribbons surrounded me, pulling me in for a hug.

"Widget." Her voice sounded wheezy, freezing me solid. "Oh, I'm so glad you're okay! I've not seen you on your feet since you were eight years old."

I pulled back from her, looking her in the eye. The whites were yellowed, and her fur didn't feel as soft as it used to. My eyes went to her face and I grimaced. Just on the corner of her lip was the start of a nasty growth. I backed away from her, then snapped my head around towards Tracer.

"She's sick!" I roared.

Tracer sighed and slumped against the wall, avoiding my eyes. My fur bristled like a brush, but before I could go on, my mother placed a ribbon between my shoulders, drawing me back.

"The air does that here, Widget," she said. "It's toxic. It's no friend to fairy types."

"Then why did you move here?" I growled.

"For you," she said. "I needed to sell everything just to make half of what the hospital wanted."

"Half? Then where's the other half coming from?"

She looked over at the desk and I followed her gaze to the perfume bottles. Tiny little bottles strained from what flowers she could get her paws on. What little System Ground had to offer, unless she'd turned to one of the floating cities in System Sky.

"Let me do it," I said.

"What?" she gasped.

"Let me do it," I repeated. "You won't make nutpeas in this dump. Pokemon in Meta City would pay much more, and I can help make it too."

"That's very kind," she said. "But they won't let you back in."

"Then I'll find a way in!" I leant towards her, brushing my nose against hers. "Please, let me help. Maybe we can make enough they can treat you, too, and we can go back to our old home and lives."

She sighed and her head fell back against the pillow. "Okay."

My heart sank. Her eyes were closed, chest heaving, breath wheezing. I shook my head and backed off the bed onto the floor.

"There's a box under the desk," she said. "Take as many as you need. See what you can do."

I dived under the desk, groping for the box. Beside it was a bag. A little errand bag that smelled as much like perfume as the rest of the room. I stuffed it until it was fit to burst and tossed it over my back. Then I bade her goodbye, nuzzling her cheek before I fled the room. The house. Onto the street.

Then I broke down into tears, slumping onto the mucky street, nose almost in the gutter.

"You won't get past the sentries. I'll walk you." Tracer's voice made my spine tingle.

I snapped my head up towards him, then clambered to my feet. Legs trembling. Fur bristling.

"You!" I growled. "You dragged her into this city. Offering her a home in a city filled with poison!"

"I offered what she needed," he said. "Somewhere safe, off the streets. Meta City don't let pokemon live in the streets. They're all turfed out into the outskirts."

I looked away from him, canines still bared as I tried to process it all. "Then how did she get like this? You have an air filter!"

"That one is not on me," he said. "I'd often find her room empty. So I'd go and look for her in the only place I knew where to find her. Arguing with the sentries to get back into Meta City so she could visit you."

My legs felt weak. I trembled from ear to tail as I desperately tried to suppress tears. But they betrayed me, running down my cheeks towards the ground.

"I need to help her," I sputtered. "I'll pay it all back and more! I'll save her. If the hospital can save me, they can save her! Right?"

I looked back at him, pleading. He nodded.

"Come on," he said. "I know a way in."

He fastened a filter mask over his head, then led me through the streets. He finally stopped close to Meta City, in a dank and smelly alley. It ended at a brick wall coated with outdated posters.

"So where is this magical entrance?" I asked.

"Right there." He nudged a manhole cover with a foot, and it slid aside. "Drop down and turn left. Keep going. At the third manhole, come back up and you'll find yourself in an alley with an underground cafe."

"Underground?" I repeated.

"It means 'secret'," he said. "The cafe is just a guise. Even Meta City isn't free of crime."

My canines poked through my lips but I couldn't look at him. "Then why didn't my mother use this?"

"I wouldn't tell her about it, and neither would you if you had any idea what that alley is like. A pretty fairy type like her wouldn't get out unscathed. The sheer thought turns my stomach."

I shook my head and sighed. Noted. I was about to climb into the sewers when something hit me. I looked back at him, examining what I could see of his face through the mask. Just his eyes, tinted green by the lenses.

"If you've lived here for so long, why aren't you sick?" I asked.

"I take precautions," he explained. "But it doesn't mean I wont get affected by this air one day. Now go. Before someone sees you."

I nodded and dropped into the sewers. Before I could call back my thanks, the lid clattered heavily back into place. I remember that day clearly, as I scampered over the metal grate towards Meta City's underground cafe. That day changed my life forever.

As I came back up, I found myself face to face with the cafe. The pokemon that sat around it had a strange air about them. They all looked rough, and not exactly Socket's chosen Meta City types either. Secret mutterings filled the air - about Socket, about the outskirts. It was to be my first port of call.

I went inside, embraced by the smell of coffee and baked goods. The zangoose behind the bar nodded as I entered, then his eye went to my bag.

"What've you got?" he asked, intrigued.

"Perfume," I said. "My mother makes it. I've come to sell it."

"Here?" he scoffed.

I shrugged. "I don't know where. In an alley somewhere, I guess."

He sniffed then moved closer to me, sniffing again. "You've come from the outskirts. Use our sewer?"

I nodded, growing wary. My fur was bristling and not out of anger.

Then the zangoose grinned and let out a laugh. "A little kid? All right. I can let you sell here. It's not as if you're selling home-made explosives." A chuckle. "They might go off and bring the whole place down."

He opened the latch beside the counter and led me into the back. It was filled with long tables, each one a stall. Pokemon sold everything from smuggled berries to weapons and biological enhancements. One pokemon, a zoroark, sat on a chair tattooing a scrafty's arm. So anyone really could get in through the sewer. If I

knew about it, then most of the outskirts probably did. How had Socket not got wind of it?

I took the table offered to me and laid out the perfumes neatly. Then I waited for the sales.

…

For the past two weeks, every day was the same. Gather the perfumes, head to Meta City, set up the stall and wait. Sales were relatively slow. Some days I made fifty to a hundred credits, while others I made none. The average was around twenty - the price I charged for one bottle. As I sat mulling over my prices, wondering whether lowering them might attract more sales, a gruff voice drew my eye.

I looked up to see a gabite standing before me. One I'd seen a few times. Both his fins were mechanical, or shrouded in gauntlets. It was hard to say, but they sported wicked claws. Claws like daggers. I'd heard a few pokemon refer to him as Iron Claw, but he'd never shown an ounce of interest in my humble little stall. I hadn't picked up what he'd said amongst all the racket the market created, but he was looking right at me. A smirk tugging at his lips. Then he turned fully to face me and approached my stall. Each step purposeful and confident. I instinctively retreated, eyes going wide and bugging from their sockets like an alarmed goldeen. He rammed his fins onto the table, those daggers gouging into the wood. Each little bottle hopped and some skittered backwards off the stand. I leapt to catch them, but a couple missed my paws and shattered on the stone floor.

I snapped my head up towards him and narrowed my eyes, flashing a canine, but he just laughed.

"Some little runt selling perfume?" He shook his head and dragged his claws free from the table. "Wow, this market just gets lower and lower. You ain't gonna make scotch sellin' that. Just leave, let the real business 'mon take over this stall."

I kept one eye on him, trying to mask my tremble as I pushed the bottles back into place.

"You hearin' me, kid?" he growled.

"Oh, I hear you." I sat back on my haunches and tried to give him as confident a look as I could muster. "I'm just not leaving."

His lip curled, flashing his sharp teeth. His two other cronies stepped forward beside him. A bagon and a druddigon. The latter flexed his claws then balled them into fists.

"Trash his stall," Iron Claw told them.

The spiky dragon leapt forward, his paws striking the underside of the table. Colourful bottles went flying, shattering against the wall and raining down floral and berry scented shards. Before I knew what was happening, I'd thrown myself at the druddigon. His jagged scales scraped the fur back from my skin, but I didn't care. A full body tackle sent him bowling backwards, causing Iron Claw to leap aside with a surprised squeak. The entire market flew into an uproar, pokemon abandoning their stalls to avoid the rolling bodies. Stalls toppled, wares scattered onto the ground. The druddigon's claws dug into my shoulders, lifting me off him. The strain at my unexpected weight reflected in his eyes, and I struggled, using it to my advantage. Before I landed on him, I turned the drop into another tackle, knocking the wind right out of his lungs.

A flash of purple fire skimmed by back and I looked over at the bagon. Much smaller, but just as nasty. My hind feet struck the druddigon's gut, eliciting a grunt, as I propelled myself towards the smaller dragon. Fire seared my fur, but I dived right through it. I couldn't stop. Gravity kept me going until I struck him hard in the face. His skull bounced off the floor and he lay limp as I landed beside him. Every hair on my body stood on end amongst bloodied and singed patches, and I stood breathing heavily, the only sound in the suddenly silent market, and leered up at the gabite.

"You wanna end up like those?" I growled, nodding to the unconscious dragons. "Or are you gonna clean up the mess?"

He followed my fleeting gaze to the ruined market stall, a look of hesitation crossing his face. Those claws flexed with a similar noise to the skeleton I hid inside my body. I wasn't exactly going to tackle him with those blades adorning his limbs, but he didn't need to know that.

He fixed me with a yellow glare, then threw his head back and laughed. Roaring laughter. Then he looked right back at me.

"You've got guts!" he said. "So what've you had done, then? What makes a runt like you so freakin' powerful you can take down two of the best pirates in Pulse City?"

I said nothing, keeping him locked in a leer. He just smirked.

"Seriously?" he went on. "You can tell old Iron Claw. You like… completely cybernetic or somethin'?"

Silence. I narrowed my eyes, bristling from ear to tail.

"I see." He chuckled. "So, what's a runt like you doin' sellin' perfume? With moves like that you could be sellin' so much more."

I spat with disgust and took a step backwards. "Like what?"

"Like yourself." He waved a paw at me. "Sell your skills, boy! I could pay you big!"

I gave a snort of derision and lowered myself to the ground, threatening an attack. Iron Claw raised his paws but he didn't move away. No fear in his eyes.

"Hear me out," he said. "I could pay you five hundred credits per day! Plus commission for each job you help me with. Even more if you take out one of my enemies!"

"You wanna hire me as a murderer?!" I roared.

"Not 'murderer'." He flexed two blades on each paw for air quotes. "No, I can do that perfectly fine myself. I just need you to detain them. Pokemon get pretty nasty when I go stealin' their wares. I'm a merchant by trade. I steal weapons and sell them in Pulse City. You'll get so much more than you will sellin' prissy perfume in this market, boy. Anythin' you steal and sell yourself, you keep. Add that onto what I'll be payin' you and you'll be livin' like a king!"

I stood, slack-jawed, staring at the dragon type. That made the average twenty credits a day I'd been heading home with look like nutpeas. Five hundred a day, minimum, could help my mother much faster. It was an attractive offer… but working for a space pirate?

"I'll do it," I said. "But only until I've made enough to save my mother."

The gabite jolted and his mouth turned into a confused frown. "You're sellin' perfume… to save your mother?"

"Yes," I said. "She's sick in the outskirts."

"And I just trashed it all!" He threw his paws into the air and fell to his knees. "Oh, I feel like such a fool!"

Lies.

The smirk on his face was enough to prove that. Hidden behind his bladed claws. He was winning no prizes for acting.

"Well." He clambered back to his feet and placed his paws on his hips, glancing over his fallen comrades. "I don't suppose you've got any berries to revive my crew, have you?"

I shook my head and he tutted.

"Pity. I'm runnin' low." He reached into his belt and tossed a small money pouch towards me. "First errand, go buy me some berries.

Once these fools are back on their feet, we'll head to my ship."

And that's how I made the first step towards the worst decision of my life. It started with buying berries.

…

Iron Claw's ship was immense. One of the few pirate ships that wasn't based on an aquatic pokemon. The huge rayquaza wound through System Sky, each one of its many windows allowing a clear view of the dark vastness beyond. I'd never been so high up. I was fascinated. Amid the blackness, stars glittered in the distance. The flickering antennae of the floating cities flashed blue and green below. Higher up than even the cities. The world below looked tiny. From this height I could even see the huge, vast whiteness of the Dead Glacier emerging beyond the mist.

"How high up are we?" I gasped.

The bagon working the navigation controls didn't even look up at me. "About a few thousand miles, I'd say."

My mouth moved silently as I repeated those words in my head. The fleeting thought that the ship could easily fall and kill us all crossed my mind, but it did nothing to quench my excitement.

The bagon's name was Vittles. An odd name. Almost as odd as the druddigon, who'd adopted the alias Winder. Not one member of Iron Claw's crew, even himself, had names typical of System. It suited both him and his ship down to a T. I was clearly the first. An odd ball amongst a group of dragons.

And oddly enough, I wasn't remotely scared. It thrilled me with excitement. No longer confined to System Ground, free to roam the skies and earn enough money to help my mother.

I dropped down from the dashboard and turned to the druddigon pilot.

"So where are we going again?" I asked.

"Magenta City," he growled. "Sit down."

I nodded. "Safety first. Gotcha."

A quick scout of the cockpit and I spotted a spare seat beside the navigation deck. As I hopped up into it, Vittles finally looked at me. A fleeting look I couldn't read. Displeasure? Haughtiness? Gas? I ignored it and tried to work out what the pictures on the navigation screen meant.

Iron Claw marched back into the cockpit, gnawing at a large fish bone. "Almost there, then, eh?"

He tossed the bone into the corner of the room and fell down into his seat, but not without firing a grin in my direction. His long, metal claws flexed and I found myself wondering if they were an enhancement or just a weapon he constantly wore, much like one might wear a scarf.

"So what are we going to Magenta for?" I asked, tail wagging.

My eye went to the window again, spotting the large, floating city and its trademark volcano in the distance.

"I just gotta pick up some stuff," said Iron Claw. "You should know full well Magenta City creates the parts for Socket's weapons and ships. The city is filled with fire types, after all. They're pretty good at melting and melding steel."

"And where do they get the steel from?"

Iron Claw grinned wider. Not a friendly grin, but I kept my cool.

"Raster City," he said.

"The outlands?" I squeaked.

"It's the only place with steel types, boy!" The gabite laughed and swivelled back to face the window. "What they can't mine in their tiny, floating city, they have to buy! None of these floating cities are old enough to have created their own supply of ore! So why not buy shed exoskeletons from the pathetic steel types for nutpeas? I like their level of thinkin'."

I hopped from the seat to join his side. "So we're buying weapon parts and selling them on?"

All three dragons turned to look at me with equal, unreadable looks. Did they all have gas?

"Buy them?" Iron Claw scoffed. "No, boy. We're just takin' then. Then we're gonna sell 'em at Pulse City's Black Market and make a fortune."

"Same old same old," said Winder.

"I get the impression you've done this before," I said slowly. "A lot."

"Aye." Iron Claw tapped his temple with one of his blades. "You don't get to be the wealthiest space pirates in System overnight."

"So… you know what you're doing?" I narrowed my eyes.

Another grin split Iron Claw's toothy maw. "That's right, boy. I know exactly what I'm doing."

Those words and that grin sent a chill through my tiny body. I finally managed to read his expression. This was a dragon with a plan, and I was fairly certain it involved me.

As we drew closer to Magenta City, the heat permeated the ship. The rayquaza lined up perfectly with the docks, turning to allow us all out through its hatch. It was dark, the dead of night, but guards peppered the docks either manning the turrets or standing armed and waiting.

Yet somehow, they didn't see us.

Iron Claw was out first, ducking behind a metal shipping crate. Then he was gone. Winder shoved be from behind, sandwiching me between himself and Vittles. We followed his lead, scurrying across while trying to stop our claws from clacking on the wood. I don't know which of us it was, but one of us scuffed our claws a little too harshly, drawing they eye of a heatmor.

The chunky fire type readied his laser and moved away from his post, scanning the shadows silently. A long tongue of flames flicked out at intervals, lighting up his surroundings like a torch. But every 'mon knows heatmor don't need much light to go by. He spotted us before he even reached the crate. Lifted his laser. Aimed.

"Take him," Iron Claw whispered into my ear.

"What?" I whispered back, too harshly.

The heatmor's eyes widened and his claw tightened on the trigger. Then he crumpled into a silent heap.

I caught Iron Claw's eye in the distance, unimpressed, disappointed. He curled his deadly claws, ushering us on. Quick. I sidestepped the heatmor, giving him one last glance. Blood pooled around him, dripping between the wooden slats into the glass dome below. The metallic tang struck my nostrils, turning my stomach and I screwed my eyes shut, scurrying after Vittles while wishing desperately this was just a dream. Or that my eyes had deceived me.

I'd never considered space pirates to be killers. They were just outlaws, living outside Socket's rules. A faction that grew from the hatred of using water dwellers as meat. Although the trend went well beyond that, attracting the lowlifes who only wanted to get off System Ground and make a living in the crime scene. But killing? I'd hit the nail on the head when I'd scoffed at Iron Claw wanting to hire me as a murderer.

I made a mental note to book it once we got back to Meta City.

The roads wound through shadowy streets lit up from the fires on the volcano. Each footstep warmed me to the core as heat from the lava seeped through the stone. During daylight it would be a lovely place to bask, but knowing what had just happened on the docks took all the loveliness out of it.

Iron Claw finally stopped beside a factory. Smoke billowed from its chimney, sucked straight up through a vent in the dome and ejected into the atmosphere. Yet the smell of metal and smoke still filled my nostrils.

"It's here," he said, nodding to a door. "Locked tight from the inside."

I stared up at the door, cast iron set in a stone wall. There was a small window allowing us to see inside. It lead into a wide corridor filled with boxes and trolleys.

Iron Claw shooed me aside and my ears twitched at the sound of metal screeching across glass. He ran his claws around the window, slicing the glass like butter. He caught it skillfully and set it aside against the wall.

"All right, boy. Let's see if you can handle this." He turned his eyes on me. "Wiggle in there and let us in, eh?"

I looked between the dragon and the window, my eyes briefly going to his wicked claws. Well, I wasn't willing to find myself on the receiving end of them, so I hopped up to the window and gripped the edge. The remains of the glass cut into my paws between my pads, but I ignored it. Mechanical skeleton creaking and groaning with the weight, I hoisted myself through and landed heavily on the other side. A quick check of my paws showed blood trickling between my toes. I gave them a sympathetic lick then turned to the door.

"It needs a code!" I hissed.

Iron Claw's face appeared where the glass was and frowned down at me, but I was too busy frowning at the code panel beside the door.

"It also needs a paw print," I added.

"Then bash it," Iron Claw's voice rumbled.

"Bash what? The panel?" I scoffed.

I shook my head and sighed. Then launched myself at the panel before Iron Claw could finish giving me a response. I heard something about 'bashing the door, you moron' as I struck the panel a second time. It splintered and cracked, revealing its wires. I grabbed them in my paws and tugged, wrenching them free. The panel went dark and something clicked. A lock. I gave the door a shove and it swung outward on its silent hinges.

A smile tugged at Iron Claw's unimpressed face. "Nice job. Get a little tackle-happy there?"

The dragons shoved past me and left me to follow them down the corridor.

It was dark and dingy, and stunk of oil and grease. Yet the floor felt smooth and dry. Wherever the steel was melded, it was clearly confined elsewhere. The heat grew more and more intense the further we ventured into the building. Not even a sniff of a pokemon was nearby, yet I could hear something. Something heavy, banging, as machines whirred away. Yet it was completely empty. As the corridor turned off into the main part of the building, it became more apparent why. I glanced through a window, noting huge mechanical shapes lumbering back and forth. Mechanical arms hoisted up crates to place on a conveyor belt, and as they moved along yet more mechanical arms and bulky implements sealed them shut with a whole lot of hollow banging. So they had machines doing their work for them. But surely they'd be 'monned? Not left to whir away at their own jurisdiction?

I caught up with Iron Claw, keeping my eye on that door. "I guess we should be wary of a machine uprising, huh?"

He fired me a frowning glance and turned sharply away from the factory. He paused by a door and wagged a claw at it.

"Metal," he said. "Can you handle this, runt?"

I snorted, wanting to retaliate with something along the lines of 'I'm a normal type, not a ground type like you!' but after what I'd already witnessed, I dared not rub him the wrong way. Instead, I set my shoulders and launched myself at the door. My muscles roared as I struck it, bouncing off like a pebble from a metagross' hide. I landed on my paws, claws scraping the tiles as I skidded along them. Then I threw myself at it again. Iron Claw roared with laughter as I was deflected a second time and grabbed me by the tail before I could skid back around the corner. Those metal blades cut into my skin and I tried my best not to grimace.

"Calm yerself," he purred. "I've got this."

He turned back to the door and threw his right arm into the air. Sand whipped up around him and flew at the door. It looked just like sand, yet it sliced through the metal like his claws did flesh. I couldn't help but wonder if anything could stand in this dragon's way. The door was reduced to scraps in an instant. He stepped over the remains like they were nothing and surveyed the room.

Boxes. Lots and lots of boxes, each one labelled with the weapon parts they contained.

"Grab 'em," he told his crew. "As many as you can. Then, if no one stops us, we'll come back for more."

Winder placed one crate atop another and grabbed both in his chunky arms. Vittles, however, could barely manage one. He staggered after the druddigon, stumbling on the metal scraps. His

eyes widened as he steadied the crate then waddled away towards the exit.

Iron Claw narrowed his eyes at me. "Guess I can't expect you to carry one, eh, quadruped?"

I snorted and grabbed one of the crates by its bindings in my teeth. A quick toss hoisted it into the air and I stepped beneath it, letting it fall onto my back. It was heavy. Much heavier than me. I wasn't sure if I was the only one who heard the hissing of my mechanical joints with every strain that seemingly small gesture took, but Iron Claw nodded his approval.

"Not just a small fry, eh?" He chuckled and grabbed two crates in his arms before leading me from the storage room. "I think I could get a lotta use outta you, boy. Even if you are a soft-hearted runt."

The trip back to the docks was about as uneventful as they came. It made me wonder how easy space pirates had it. That was until we reached the docks. The pokemon working there had found their slaughtered companion.

Iron Claw merely tutted and led us a little further along. Yet more cargo crates provided a convenient barrier between us and the dock workers. But it was further along from the ship. Iron Claw tapped the bagon on the shoulder, drawing his eye.

"Drop the box," he whispered, "and go and get the ship. Bring it closer."

The small dragon didn't even complain. I wondered why as I looked between him and the dock workers. Even the police 'mon had shown up now. A typhlosion trailed by a flareon. After witnessing that sand tomb, a confrontation would hardly be anything the gabite couldn't handle.

My eye went back to Vittles as he scampered away from the cargo crate. His hide shifted colour and in an instant he'd vanished from

sight. My jaw dropped. What kind of enhancement was that?!

Iron Claw said nothing, keeping his eye on the two police 'mon. Sirens began to sound out over the city as yet more police threatened to show up at the scene. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Winder shaking his head.

It seemed to take forever, but before any more pokemon showed up at the crime scene, Vittle's crate rose into the air and the bagon appeared slowly behind it.

"Follow me," he said.

The little bagon scampered over the docks towards the ship, where he vanished once more behind its cloak. Iron Claw gave me a shove in the tail with his foot and I took off after the small dragon. Winder followed close behind while Iron Claw covered the rear. That was when the voices reached our ears. That flareon was quick.

No. There would me no more casualties. I had this one.

I tossed the box towards the ship then tackled the flareon to the ground. The wind left his lungs in a hiss, then he struck the floor hard on his back. A quick belly flop left him stunned and dazed. I swivelled in the air and returned to the box, tossing it onto the ship. Vittles ducked with a squeak and turned his head towards the box as it crashed into the other… three?

I turned my head back to see Iron Claw standing over the flareon. Blood shimmered on his claws as a flame thrower lit up the sky, flying from the typhlosion's mouth. A small army of fire types rushed the dragon, fists blazing, bodies lit up with flames.

By the time they reached the flareon's corpse, the ship was already in motion. Iron Claw leapt at it and hung from its door as it left the docks, tossing the remaining crate ahead of him. I instinctively moved it to make way for the sand dragon, not getting a single

thanks in return. Instead, he stood in the open doorway, watching the docks. Laughing.

"Another job well done!" he said, turning back towards me. "Glad to see you took initiative there, boy! Get some rest. You're gonna need your strength once we reach Pulse City."

Pulse City? Well, I should have expected that. Guess I wasn't escaping any time soon. I nodded and turned towards the rear of the ship.

"Take the third room along!" Iron Claw told me. "If I want you, I'll holler!"

He laughed again, marching towards the ship's cockpit. I gave a glance back at it, not spotting any of the dragons. Then I trudged along towards the room. It wasn't until I was inside that I finally let my ears droop and my tail fall between my legs. I slumped to the floor, landing nose-first in dust. The only thing that could pass as a bed was an old mattress thrown into the corner of the room, right next to a pile of dirty sheets in desperate need of a laundrette.

I didn't touch any of them. Instead I took the opportunity to examine my paws and tail. Both needed a good clean up before they got infected. Not that they could get infected. All those enhancements to my body filtered that out, but still… I sat grooming them while I ran over the events in my head.

Iron Claw's ruthless slaughters, the whole raid on that factory, his careless grabbing of my tail in his bladed claws… did he even have a moral compass? If I hadn't tackled that flareon… would he still be alive? We'd have probably been on the ship before he even reached us. Why did I do that?

I spat out a clump of dusty fur and turned my eyes to the window. Dark. We'd left Magenta City and were back in System Sky's vast blackness of night. I clambered to my feet and looked out. In the far distance I could see the twinkling lights of another city, unknown to

me. I didn't even know which way was north from this height. Was it Pulse City? No… surely the nose of the rayquaza ship would be pointing towards it by now.

Pulse City…

I could only imagine such a place. Hopefully once we were out of it, we'd head back to System Ground. I didn't even care where. I just wanted to get away from these space pirates. No pokemon should have to die for the sake of credits. I wasn't even too sure I wanted the dragon's blood money.

Little did I know that was all set to change before we left Pulse City.

…

Pulsing music reached my ears as the ship pulled into the docks. I'd been sleeping, and somehow was really grateful I was even waking up. I'd been fighting off sleep, but thankfully the dragons had left me well alone. I scrambled to my paws and looked from the window. Huge neon signs lit up shop and club fronts, some flickering erratically as their bulbs struggled to stay lit. The music wasn't so much a melody as a concoction of various themes and rock music blaring from the various bars and colourful entertainment billboards.

I scrambled from the room, following Iron Claw's bellowing voice towards the cockpit. He stood by the exit hatch, muzzle creased into a frown as I approached him.

"Grab a crate," he said. "We're already late."

"Late for what?" I asked around the crate's bindings.

Iron Claw watched as I tossed it onto my back. Again. It hurt a lot more this time, I think I'd pulled something.

"Late to meet Worm," Iron Claw spat. "He's messaged me three times since we left Magenta. Pulse City is gagging for weapons and

we're supplyin'! Get a move on, runt. Follow Winder and make it fast. All of ya!"

I staggered off the ship beneath the weight of the crate, desperate not to drop it. The space pirates gathered around the docks watched us curiously, claws twitching as some considered interjecting. As I strolled by with one on my back, balanced like a spinning plate, they seemed to reconsider. Wary looks passed between them as they watched the tiny eevee and his big box. I could almost hear their brains whirring as they tried to process whether what they saw was true or a facade, but not one wanted to find out.

Good. I was in no mood to fight.

I caught up with Winder and Vittles, then cast a glance back to the ship. Iron Claw was still making sure it was secure before grabbing his own crates off the docks.

"Why do you put up with someone like that?" I asked the two dragons.

Winder cast me a wary glance while Vittles glanced back and cleared his throat.

"Simple," he said. "You seen those things on his claws, right?"

I nodded.

"Well… we don't wanna get on the receivin' end o' them."

"Besides," said Winder, "it pays. Now shut up talkin' and keep on walkin'."

He nudged me with his foot and I had to teeter to keep the crate from toppling to the ground.

The long road ended at a huge building with 'market' in neon letters above it. As we sidled in, a throh barrelled past with his own crew in tow. A rather rag-tag group of misfits trailed by a small, runty mawile

in a scarf much too big for him. He caught it under his feet and tripped into me, almost causing me to drop the crate. Winder stopped beside me, catching it on his flank. He shot the mawile a filthy look to the back of the head as he returned to the large fighting type, and nudged the crate back in place until it was balanced.

"Watch where you're goin'," Winder hissed.

"He bumped me!" I squeaked.

"I don't care. You break the contents, it'll be your hide!"

I deeply hoped he wasn't speaking from experience. I tried my best not to cower and instead put on a brave face, following the two dragon types through the market's crowds. A low table spread before us 'monned by a sewaddle I could only assume was Worm.

Winder dropped his two crates onto the sewaddle's somewhat bare table, drawing the bug pokemon's confident stare.

"We rustled six crates," said Winder. "Iron Claw's on his way."

"No he ain't, he's here." Iron Claw dropped his own crates beside Winder's and peered at the bug pokemon over the top of them. "I think you'll be satisfied."

"Go on then," said Worm. "Bust 'em open, let's see what's inside."

The arrival of the crates had already drawn quite the audience. Iron Claw brandished his claws and sliced the bindings open. The crates took a bit of prying to loosen the nails, but once one was open, Worm clambered up the side and poked his tiny head over the rim.

"Oh ho ho!" he crooned. "Laser modules! Now we don't get too many of them!"

There was cheering from the surrounding pokemon, along with clapping paws. I found myself shoved aside as larger pokemon

scrambled to the table. It all became quite a blur and I stepped back, away from the table and out of the crowd.

Once Iron Claw's exchange was done, he returned to me and gave me a nod.

"All sold," he said. "Couldn't have done it without ya."

"Really?" I growled, ears drooped, shoulders slumped.

"What's that look for?" Iron Claw flashed his sharp teeth. "You climbed through that window, boy! None of us coulda fit through that!"

I snorted and looked away from him. Fully aware of his claws. Part of me waited for him to slice away, but instead he just laughed.

"Wanna see what we earned today?" He slammed something onto my head.

I flinched, body locking up. But instead, a visor flashed before my eye. A large number appeared on it, and my eyes slowly widened as I realised what I was looking at.

Seven thousand and five hundred credits.

"That's your share," said Iron Claw. "Bet ya wouldn't have made that sellin' perfumes in Meta City's underbelly, eh?"

I shook my head, stiffly at first, then more energetically as I turned to look back up at him.

"No! I would not!" I said. "I… this is really from grabbing those weapons?"

"Aye." Iron Claw curled his fists into his hips and smirked down at me. "And a little extra for nailin' that flareon. We coulda got a lot more than that if we'd grabbed more crates. This is the life we lead, boy. You in?"

The images of that bloodied heatmor and the poor flareon crossed my mind once more, but I shook it away, letting it fade into nothingness. My mother came back to the front of my mind. More than seven thousand credits. Just ten more errands and we could afford a place back in Meta City. We could afford to get her well again.

I nodded as a grin split my muzzle. "I'm in."

…

More than a month passed by. Some errands fetched far less than the raid we'd performed in Magenta City. Iron Claw steered well away from that area of System Sky, and for good reason. It would be heavily defended for a while as the fire types kept a look out for his trademark ship. Instead, we visited Meta City's underbelly for the chance of the odd weapon popping up. We'd do weapons raids in other areas such as Boolean City, or visit Binary's entertainment district for a gambling session (or a stroll around, in my case). We'd drop in on Raster City to raid metal scraps and ore - some pokemon in Pulse City used them to make their own weapons and doohickeys (although admittedly they were a bit shoddy…) All odd jobs that very rarely brushed seven thousand credits.

Most days were spent idly flying around System Sky, or gambling in Pulse City. Well… the dragons gambled. I'd either sit with them or skulk in a corner with a drink Iron Claw had cheerfully bought me before returning to his games. Even if I'd been offered to join in, I wouldn't be risking my hard earned credits. They were for my mother, not throwing away.

At night I'd check my balance, watching it slowly creep up. It didn't help that on the quieter days - which were often - Iron Claw didn't even pay me the five hundred he'd promised (and there was no way I was confronting him about it…) We needed a plan. A big plan. I'd not spoken to my mother in weeks, and I was growing anxious. Twenty thousand credits wasn't going to get us a home. It was barely enough to get her well. Another ten thousand, maybe. At least I

could give her that but… she'd still be living in the outskirts. She'd just get sick again.

I sighed and let my paw flop to my side. A small stream of dust rose from the mattress and I rolled over to face the empty room. Less dusty. No luxuries. Every credit I earned was set aside for my mother. For some reason, Iron Claw kept feeding me. He fed us all. Part of me wondered if he set a little savings aside for keeping his crew.

Since that stunt in Magenta City, he hadn't killed anyone again. That was a plus. Maybe space pirates weren't all that bad?

The ship came to a halt and I heard the gabite bellow for us all to get a move on. I cast a quick glance from the window and felt my stomach do a turn.

In the distance was Socket's mansion, the System flag waving high above the rooftops. Mechanical trees stood tall along the streets just beyond the docks, silent sentinels in a night-shrouded city.

But just as one would expect, Meta City was not quiet. Pokemon bustled back and forth, oblivious to the cloaked ship. What on earth were we doing back here? Even if we visited the underbelly, Meta's docks was not the place to park.

I left the room, a million questions forming in my mind, but they all retreated back into forgotten files as I stared up at the gabite. A huge grin split his face and he tapped his arm with his wicked claws.

"Got a little job for you, boy," he purred. "Nice and easy, like."

I glanced out of the open hatch then shrugged. "Go on."

"Hospital raid," he said. "Get in there, grab some medicines, and meet us back here."

"What do you need medicines for?" I asked, meeting his eyes.

"Pulse City," he said. "They pay out the nose for medicine, boy! Dunno if you've realised, but weapons have been a little dry lately. So I thought why not raid some medicines? Could easily land you, oh… I dunno… fifteen thousand credits per run?"

My jaw almost hit the floor.

That was it. I left the ship, keeping my wits about me. Iron Claw had his head screwed on straight. He might stand out like a sore paw pad, but me? A normal type in Meta City? So long as the dock workers didn't see me suddenly appear out of thin air, then they wouldn't suspect a thing.

It weren't far to Central Meta Hospital. The huge, white, sterile building was exactly where it's name said it should be. The centre of Meta City. A fair trek from the docks, but without pokemon casting suspicious glances my way it didn't take long to get there. What did take a while was finding a way in. Sure, I could walk through the A&E reception, but to stroll into wards? Into locked storage cupboards? Now that part wasn't going to be easy.

One would think.

I managed to get into the wards with all the ease of a haunter through a brick wall. I'd only been a space pirate for like, a month, but I had pick pocketing down to a fine art. I'd snagged guns, pocket computers, credit pouches and all sorts from space pirates and commoners alike. I'd been caught once. By a machoke who'd taken an extreme dislike to me taking his computer. I'd received a black eye that day, made a whole lot more sore by the tattoo I'd had done two days prior. Courtesy of Iron Claw in order to make me look tougher. He had a friend do it 'for free'. Coupled with a bruise it smarted my paws off, but I learned a valuable lesson. Be more careful.

So as a janitor passed me by, I craned my head back to spot a set of keys hanging by his tail. The little minccino didn't feel a thing as I grabbed the keys from his belt, snipping through the leather loop

with my sharp teeth. Perfect. Keys was what I'd need to get into the storage cupboards.

I paused by a map, tucking the keys into my belt pouch. Muttering under my breath 'storage, storage' I managed to find a promising area between Intensive Care and MRI. I adjusted the rucksack over my shoulders and followed the orange corridor around until it spat me out in the red area. Intensive Care. Computers beeped in the distance, monitoring heart rates. A young meowstic stopped me on the way, glancing between myself and her Clipboard.

"Who are you here to see?" she asked. "I don't recognise you."

"I just arrived," I said. "I'm here to see my dad."

Lies. She narrowed her eyes at me then looked back at her Clipboard.

"I don't believe we have any eevee here," she said. "Or any of your eevolutions."

"That's because he's a meowstic."

The look on her face was one of disbelief. I simply shrugged.

"What is his name?" She stared intensely down at her Clipboard, scrolling with an index claw.

"I don't know it," I lied.

She looked back up with a start and opened her mouth to speak, but I cut her off.

"He never let me call him by his name. I don't even remember my mother using it. We all had to call him 'Dad'. It's a habit, see. It was to get me, and my little brother, saying 'Dad' first. You know what dads are like, right?"

The look on her face was unreadable. It wasn't working. I'd have to do something, and fast. I glanced down the corridor behind her, into the waiting room. Bustling nurses. This wasn't going to be easy.

"I can't let you in," she said. "I'll have to call security."

I muttered under my breath, 'Oh jack.' She reached for the microphone on her scarf but before she could do anything, I leapt at her, fastening my jaws around her throat. I cut off any yelp she intended to let out, and we tumbled down an empty corridor. When I let go, she'd fallen unconscious. I scooped up the Clipboard, noting the male meowstic's name. It definitely wasn't Dad. I scooted it aside and sat her up, then looked around.

A grin split my face. The storage closet!

I grabbed the keys and leafed through for the card that would open the door. Every janitor would need to get in at some point, surely? Each one failed. Well, I wasn't busting it open this time. Not in a hospital full of pokemon who might hear or see me, or both. I spat the keys back out and turned to the meowstic. Still unconscious.

Around her neck was her name badge, hidden under all that fur. I snipped it free, getting some of her fur in the process. Then I flashed it at the storage closet's card panel. It clicked open and I stifled a cheer. The card key found its new home in my pouch, just in case I needed it to get back out. Sure, I wasn't a meowstic, but it looked official at first glance.

The storage closet was full of medicine. I removed the rucksack Iron Claw had given me and began stuffing it with all sorts from saline solution to needles. Concentrated berry concoctions, pain killers… it was all here. Once I was done, I left the cupboard and kicked the door shut. I considered giving the meowstic her badge back and changed my mind. The less evidence I left, the better. At least the minccino's keys looked just like dropped keys, and took the suspicion from me.

I sauntered back the way I came, retracing my footsteps back to the docks.

Iron Claw laughed jovially as he went through the medicine bag. "Well done, boy!"

I puffed out my chest. "All in a day's work, Captain!"

He snorted. "I told you to cut that out."

I shrugged, watching as he tossed the bag back into the cockpit.

"So," I said. "With that, I'm closer to saving my mother. Reckon we can pay her a visit and transfer it?"

"I thought you were waitin' until you got seventy thousand." The dragon didn't even look at me.

"I was, but… I've been thinking…" I cleared my throat. "If we can get things started, at least she'll be in a hospital. Then… I might make enough to get her a small apartment at least-"

"No."

"No?" I raised an eyebrow. "But I've earned it! I can do what I want with my wages."

"Really?" Iron Claw stood up and frowned down at me. "What makes you think I'm even payin' you?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You were sellin' perfumes back in the underbelly, right? Floral. Berry. Had 'sylveon' written all over it." He chuckled. "You really think I'm payin' you to take care of some fairy?"

My jaw went slack. I didn't know what to say.

"Hit a nerve, eh?" Iron Claw asked.

"My mother isn't just some fairy," I said slowly. "She's my mother, and she saved my life! It's my job to save hers."

"I ain't payin' you to take care of some fairy, boy." He chuckled and kicked the bag further into the cockpit.

"Yes you are, and you know it." I rose to my own feet, leering up at the gabite. "You told me I'd make more money here than I would selling perfumes. Now let me rescue my mother!"

Iron Claw spread his blades and took a step back. "Then transfer it. You've got your visor, use it."

"You never told me how…"

I brought up the visor, keeping one eye on the sand dragon. A sinking feeling spread through my gut. Blank screen, just numbers, no option to transfer. I searched it frantically, but it was just the amount, and the bank's name 'PCB'.

"How?" I growled.

Iron Claw chuckled and folded his arms. "You can't, boy. Restrictin' your use stopped you accessin' it and sendin' it off to some fairy."

I flashed my canines and lowered my head, an uncharacteristic snarl rising in my throat. "Then what have you been paying me for?!"

"I haven't been paying you!" Iron Claw roared back. "It were a lie! Keep you keen, use your size and that strength you've got! You're a tiny runt who fits places we can't, and a normal type?" He waved out at Meta City. "Blends right in. And, if in the process there's one less fairy in System? Bonus!"

A huge, childlike roar left my throat and I flew at him, knocking him backwards. He rolled head over tail before launching me from the door. Claws sliced my flesh, but I didn't care. I stood back up to throw myself back onto the ship, but he leapt out like a dart. His

huge frame barrelled into me, sending me across the docks. Pokemon scattered. Screams filled the air. Mine joined them as sharp claws cut into me, raking over my body.

Vittles and Winder joined him on the docks and a little hope filled my chest. But it was expunged when I saw their faces. Their leers. Their snarling teeth as Iron Claw stood back up and waved towards me.

"Go on," he said. "Finish him off. I'm done."

They were on me like rabid mutts, fists striking my ribs and jaws snapping over my ruff to throw me across the docks. I tried to fight back. I got in a few tackles, even a take down. But those heavy wounds to my body bled freely, painfully, draining me of my strength. Eventually, I had to flee. Flee before the police showed up. They did. They tried to stop me, but not with accusations. I didn't want to speak to them. With what little energy I had left, I fled, leaving bloody paw prints on the streets.

The two dragons didn't chase after me. I didn't look back. I've no idea if they were even apprehended. They probably fled.

I've no idea how I even left the city. I managed to get out into the outskirts, somehow, where I finally collapsed in Spool City on some filthy back street.

Sore. Beaten. Bleeding. I could feel the warmth pooling from my nostrils as I let my eyes close, letting my breathing slowly level out. Then I heard footsteps. Slow. Approaching. Whoever it was could finish me off for all I cared.

They stopped close to my muzzle, and I could feel whoever it was staring down at me. When they didn't speak, or move, I finally cracked an eye open. The blurred features of a delphox stared back at me, briefly coming into focus before I finally let it close again. A dry chuckle left my throat, but I couldn't think of any words.

He spoke first. "Scourge of the skies." His voice was wrought with disappointment. "Oh, what your mother would think of you."

I chuckled again. "I was doin' it for her."

"I know."

I took in a deep, trembling breath. "So what are you gonna do to me? Turn me over to Socket?"

I heard him take a deep drag of his cigar. "No."

I was rapidly losing strength. Every single word I tried was becoming a chore.

"I deserve it," I said.

"Oh, I know. But what kind of friend would I be if I did that?"

Friend? I laughed bitterly.

"Then what?" I asked. "Turn me into my mother?"

He stubbed his cigar out on a damp wall then scooped me into his arms. I remember thinking 'typical' before everything finally went black.

…

I woke up in the same bed my mother had occupied. It smelled like her. The whole room did. Even a few perfume pots still stood on the table, waiting for the son who never showed up to collect them. It tasted bitter. I buried my face into the pillow, trying to lose myself in pleasant memories of games and bedtime stories back in a clean, Meta City house. I even thought I smelled her baking.

The door opened and I looked back, expecting to see her, but all I saw was Tracer with a cigar between his teeth. His eyes widened

with surprise and he removed it, the smoke curling from his claws as he flicked ash into the hallway.

"You're awake," he finally said. "It's been two days."

My claws dug into the duvet. The last time I'd seen my mother she could barely get off the bed. Where was she? Tracer seemed to read my question before I could bring myself to ask it. His muzzle turned into a frown and he sighed, glancing to the dingy window.

"I'm afraid… you're mother passed away," he said slowly. "Two weeks ago."

Tears pricked my eyes and I screwed them shut, shaking my head. "No. No, I won't believe-"

"Widget…" His voice cracked and he took another deep breath. Then a drag on his cigar, more to calm himself down. "I'm sorry. I did all I could to help her."

I took a deep breath myself, which shuddered with the threat of sobs. "I believe you."

Surprise crossed his features again and he folded his arms, eyeing me up. "Good. Because… I was very fond of both you and your mother."

Past tense? Of course. I sobbed into my paws, body shaking. Still sore and bound with bloody bandages.

"What happened, Widget?" his voice was soft.

I looked up again, blinking back tears. "I… I wanted to help her. So badly. These pirates, they…" My voice trailed off and I wiped tears from my eyes with a paw. "They tricked me. Lied to me. Used me."

"They're space pirates," Tracer said flatly. "What on earth were you doing trusting space pirates?"

"I was desperate," I said. "I saw the money we made in the first raid, and I guess… I found hope."

"In the wrong place."

I grimaced. "I'm aware of that. They wouldn't give me so much as a single credit."

He took another long drag of his cigar. I finally cracked an eye open and looked at him. He was staring straight back at me.

"Then why not help me round them up?" he asked. "I'll pay you. You can turn your life around rounding up space pirates and criminals."

"Are you serious?" I asked. "What about Socket?"

"Let me deal with Socket." He placed his cigar back between his teeth and turned from the room. "Get some rest. I'll bring you some lunch."

…

The entire cockpit fell silent as Widget finished his story. The laser module he'd been batting back and forth rested under one paw. He could feel N0ize looking at him over the back of his chair, but it wasn't a leer. Wasn't a glare. Not even a look of amusement.

The incineroar sighed and brushed his ears back. "What were you doin' trustin' old Iron Claw?"

Widget shrugged his shoulders. "Like I said. I thought there was some hope there, to save my mother."

"He's all lies." N0ize turned back to the cracked windscreen. "Even space pirates can't stand him. There were a little celebration when that fancy bounty hunter Waveform finally turned him in, and all his crew with him."

Widget chuckled. "Yeah, Tracer was sore about that. He'd wanted to turn him in himself."

"And you?"

"Didn't care." Widget shrugged again.

N0ize craned his neck around to look at him. "So… I guess that tattoo of yours ain't so much a fancy look than it is a painful reminder?"

"Oh, it's a reminder." Widget swatted the module to his other paw and met the incineroar's eyes. "That someone can turn their life around for the better."

The space pirate's eyes widened and he turned away so quick his seat squeaked. Widget thought he saw him wipe a paw across his face.

"Well, thanks for the story, pup," he said. "Let's focus on gettin' to the Analogue Isles, eh?"

Tracer stepped back into the cockpit and looked between the three pokemon. The smell of cigar smoke clung to his fur, but if N0ize noticed he didn't say anything.

Tracer looked back down at the eevee. "Did I miss something?"

"Not really. Just some old boy talk." Widget grinned from ear to ear and swatted the module into the air towards the delphox. "Catch!"

…

A/N - For those who remember Iron Claw's name, he did evolve into a garchomp post-Widget. And yes, he's the very garchomp Macro had a run-in with where he almost lost his eye.

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 65

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Sixty Five

The dinner time bell rang out through Wildcard Gamma, snatching Macro out of a dreamless sleep. He cracked an eye open and licked his dry lips. Dinner. Why didn't he feel hungry? He shifted against his pillow, feeling the sticky wetness against his cheek, then it all came back to him.

DL. Those memories. That fire.

He let out a groan and pushed himself up, running a paw over his scar if only to wipe away some of the stickiness. The entire room seemed to stink. How long had he been in there? He staggered from the bed and made a bee-line for the shower. Hopefully that would make him feel a little better.

Anchor turned the corner from the cockpit and did a double-take.

"Cap'n!" he said. "I was just comin' to get you."

Macro mumbled something incoherent as he opened the door to the bathroom.

"Groggy, huh?" Anchor asked. "Yanno… Switch contacted me."

Macro paused in the doorway, not looking back at the granbull.

"They're safe on System Ground," Anchor explained. "Found some 'mon who can help them. So… they're not alone."

"Pirates?" Macro's voice cracked.

"Well… yeh, actually," said Anchor. "Sort of."

That was all Macro was willing to hear. He let the door close and switched on the shower, letting the lavender water wash away the previous night.

Lavender…

He reached for the switch and changed the setting without even looking at it. The scent of the water gained a citrus zing and he slumped against the wall, sliding down onto the floor. It wasn't until he opened his eyes again he realised he was still wearing his scarf.

Muttering under his breath, he tore it off and tossed it towards the sink where it landed in a citrussy puddle.

Pirates…

Macro leered at the scarf, watching as the water sloshed over it. Pirates hadn't been what he'd wanted to hear. Space Pirates weren't good pokemon. He should know. But… they did also hate Socket. And right now, all he wanted to do was pin her down and shove his laser in her face. That vindictive gothitelle had gone too far.

He pushed himself back to his trembling feet and switched off the water. Everything ached. He had no idea why. What had he done to ache so much? He gathered up his sodden scarf and wrung it dry as he stood beneath the fur drier. For much too long. By the time his scarf had dried, his entire body resembled a cutiefly hatchling. He tried to smooth out the static to no avail as he made for the cockpit.

Then faltered.

Everyone was in the kitchen, talking. The smell of pancakes danced before his nose, its efforts doing nothing to swindle him. In fact, it made him feel sick. He sighed and turned his back on the kitchen, taking his usual seat in the cockpit.

A seat that felt too small without DL's slender body taking up part of it. He'd instinctively pushed himself up against the right arm, and the

space beside him felt so bare. A lump rose in his throat and he forced himself into the centre of the seat, kicking his feet up onto the dashboard.

It felt so wrong.

Anchor's heavy footsteps drove away any desire to let himself cry any further. Macro cracked an eye open as the granbull fell heavily into his own seat, still clutching a pancake. Or… was that a pancake sandwich?

"Thought I heard you come in here," said Anchor. "Not hungry this mornin'?"

"No," said Macro.

Anchor gave him a sympathetic look, but rather than voicing his concerns, he took a bite out of his breakfast and turned back to the controls.

"We'll be back at Cyan City in about half an hour," he said. "Took a detour so I could check on Surge's ship. Wanted to make sure it wasn't traceable, and unfortunately it is."

"What does that mean?" Macro asked. "Is she followin' us?"

"Fortunately, no," Anchor explained. "Jumper's got her locked up. I just wanted to make sure Socket wasn't tracing her. I destroyed the chip and chucked it. So if she had been tracking us en-route from Cyan City, she isn't any more."

"Fantastic," Macro spat.

"Cap'n…" Anchor's expression softened and looked at Macro face on. "She'll come to her senses. Give her time."

Macro stared blankly ahead, watching Cyan City's dome draw closer. Time… with all those Ultra Beasts being released into System, he wasn't even sure how much time they even had. His accident had

cost them dearly, as had his expedition to Botnet City. If they were going to stop Socket, he had to box up his emotions again. He scratched beneath his horn and sighed.

"Forget it," he said. "Let's just get this training done and go after BackDoor. I'll deal with Socket later."

"I think you mean we will deal with Socket later," said Anchor.

"Sure." Macro let his eyes close and tucked his paws behind his head. "Of course I did."

Anchor clearly knew he hadn't meant that at all. Boxing up his emotions wasn't going to be easy.

…

The Analogue Isles sure were chilly.

Tracer hugged his trench coat around himself as he stood on Beta Docks, watching Cyph3r and N0ize work away at their ship. The sharpedo's windscreen was still shattered as the pair were more interested in the damage dealt to its jaws. Apparently the close range attack weapon was more important than 'keepin' a little grit outta your eyes'.

"You know," said Widget, "there was a time I often wondered why I never visited the Analogue Isles during my rogue days." He glanced up at the yellowed sky. So yellow it could make the air in the Meta City Outskirts look like a haven. "I take that all back."

"Well." Tracer tapped his claws on his arm, wishing deeply he'd thought to stock up on cigars before they took their little trip to Pulse City. "We'll be out of here soon enough, don't you worry."

The delphox glanced around at the docks. It was hard to see much beyond them, the smog was so thick. Oddly enough, he could see the coast line of the mainland quite clearly. Wave City's towering

skyscrapers stood out on the skyline, and their lighthouse spun its light periodically in their direction, almost beckoning him to jump in the ocean and swim for shore. But he knew full well if he tried that, Cyph3r would snipe him with his railgun. And he'd already witnessed the magmortar in action to know he would not miss.

The incineroar lifted his head and fixed his no-nonsense eyes on Tracer and Widget. "Got a problem here."

"Oh?" Tracer cocked an eyebrow. "Ship lose a tooth?"

"Don't mess with me, fox, it ain't cute." N0ize folded his huge arms and leant back against the sharpedo. "Those spikes clean knocked out the jaw's bracer. Gonna need a new one, or we ain't flyin' anywhere."

"How, may I ask," said Tracer, "does one missing key element to your ship's weapon prevent us from flying?"

"No torpedoes," said N0ize. "We're out. If Sharkie here can't bite, then we can't defend ourselves."

Tracer sighed and ran a paw over his face. He caught Widget staring up at him, and once he'd got his attention, the eevee mouthed 'Sharkie?' then stifled a giggle.

Tracer turned back to N0ize and raised a paw in a shrug. "What do you want us to do about it?"

"I need you to go find me a bracer," said N0ize.

"Why can't you do it?" asked Tracer. "It's your ship."

"Because I can't leave her here unattended, and I'm not gonna leave you two here watchin' her. You might hop in and bail for all I know."

"He knows us so well already," Widget muttered. "I'd say somethin' about it being sweet, but it really isn't."

Tracer pretended he hadn't heard him. "Well, I'm afraid neither of us know what a bracer is."

"Shops do," said N0ize. "And correct me if I'm wrong, but I thought I said you two are payin'. So go get buyin'."

"Really?" Widget asked. "You're trusting us to go and buy you a part for your ship, yet you won't leave us waiting by it? What makes you so sure we're gonna come back?"

Tracer's heart sank. Well, there went that escape plan before he'd even fully thought it out. He made a mental note to buy the eevee a muzzle.

"Well, let's think about that." N0ize had his back to them again, hidden inside 'Sharkie's' jaws. "I don't know how much you're aware of this, but the Analogue Isles have their own Kraken."

Widget swallowed audibly and looked up at the delphox. "I think he means one of them jellyfish things."

"Oh, it ain't a jellyfish." N0ize looked back over his shoulder at them and grinned. "Good luck out there, fuzz."

Tracer hesitated for a moment, staring at N0ize's back hunched over his ship. With a shake of his head, he turned and made his way deeper into Beta City.

"I don't like this," said Widget. "It isn't fun anymore. I wanna go home."

"You and me both," said Tracer. "I'm beginning to think taking on this mission to round up Annie was the worst decision I ever made."

"Really? 'Cause I think that part was pretty cool. My gripe lies in heading to Pulse City."

"Yes, remind me again why we went there?"

"To sell Socket's ship and buy a new one, so we looked the part," explained Widget.

"Oh yes." Tracer rubbed at his ear and sighed. "I'm still not sure how to break that news to her."

"Given how it ends, I say don't."

Tracer snorted and reached for a cigar… which wasn't there. He muttered under his breath and paused to take in his surroundings. Was it his imagination, or was the smog getting worse? He deeply wished he'd not left his mask on the government ship.

"Well, I don't know about you." Widget spoke oddly quietly. "But I don't see a single shop anywhere."

"Never mind shop, I don't see any buildings," said Tracer. "It's all docks and boxes."

"Deeper we go then."

Widget skipped on ahead, and Tracer caught up with him before he lost him in the smog. Eventually they came to the end of the docks, their feet finding tarmac as they arrived on one of the roads. The painted stripes and presence of stationary lorries reminded Tracer of how backwards the Analogue Isles were. The high roads taken by hover vehicles hadn't made it this far, meaning the ground was very much separated into pedestrian and traffic areas. For sake of rules, the two pokemon moved off the road to the concrete sidewalk. Not that there was a single moving vehicle taking up the road.

"Here are all the buildings." Widget squinted up at them. "What's left of them anyway."

Tracer finally tore his eyes off the stationary lorries to take in the skyscrapers. Huge chunks had been torn away, windows were smashed in, and doors were pulled clean off their hinges. Whatever had attacked them had left no debris on the ground. All the evidence

of an attack was above their heads, as if something had swooped down and just eaten a piece of a building before flying off elsewhere.

Tracer's stomach tightened into knots. Given the creatures coming through, was it really unbelievable that one might take a liking to sampling System's various architecture? He reached for his stick and turned to head back to the docks, keeping one eye on the missing bricks above them.

"Nope," he said. "We are not staying around here, Widget."

"But we need to get the bracer," the eevee whined.

"Forget the bracer. We can get it somewhere else." Tracer began to make his way back to the docks. "With all this smog and the evidence of an attack, it just doesn't feel save here. Add to that the missing pokemon, and I think we have a recipe for potential death and demise."

"Huh, that would make a pretty good video game, actually." Widget skipped to keep up with him. "Guess we're gonna have to fly in an unprotected ship then, eh?"

"Yes, and I think you should be the one to break the news to our new friends."

"Why me?"

"Because you're the one with the silver tongue." Tracer paused and glanced down at him. "And the unbreakable skeleton."

"All right, fine," Widget sighed. "I'll be the bringer of bad news. Man, I should have been born an absol." He paused and looked around, one paw in the air. "Wait… where are we?"

Tracer followed the eevee's gaze. With all the smog, it had been difficult to gauge how dark it was. But it was suddenly very dark. The

eevee's voice echoed slightly, and Tracer reached behind him for his stick.

"We appear to have inadvertently entered a building," Tracer explained.

"Funny," said Widget. "I was convinced we were heading back the way we came. But I suppose it is pretty hard to navigate here, given I can't see six feet in front of me let alone the stinkin' sky." He turned one-eighty and froze again. "How do we get out? I can't see a door."

Tracer turned on the spot, keeping his stick raised and ignited. It did little to light their way, reflecting off the glossy black walls and thick clouds around them.

"What kind of decor is this?" he scoffed. "Who in their right mind would paint their walls black?"

Widget chuckled and glanced back at him with a smile. "Remind me to tell you about this liepard I once knew."

Tracer shook his head and moved towards one of the walls. He placed his paw upon it and nodded to Widget to do the same.

"Come on," he said, "we'll use the wall as a guide. We're sure to find a door sooner or later."

"I can't even see any furniture," said Widget. "Why do I get the feeling every pokemon here just packed their bags and left?"

Tracer didn't answer. He felt eyes on his back, boring into him. A chill ran down his spine and he lifted his stick higher in a desperate bid to light up further into the dark building.

"Yo, Tracer, you listenin'?" Widget craned his neck back to look at him.

Tracer kept his ears fixed forward as he scoured the building. That feeling of being watched didn't leave him. Wherever he turned, it was

on his back, unwilling to face him. Taunting, enjoying his fear.

"We're not alone," he muttered. "Move it, Widget. We need to find that door!"

Widget nodded and turned, moving as quickly as he could along the wall. Tracer followed behind him, almost stumbling over the eevee's tail in a desperate bid to find the nearest door, window, or breakable wall.

"Do you not feel it?" he gasped.

"Of course I do," said Widget. "I'm just not a quaking wreck like you are."

"I think 'claustrophobic' is the term you're looking for," Tracer growled.

"Nah, that's not what I was goin' for. I was goin' for that thing where it's so dark you think someone's watching you. All psychological. Keep tellin' yourself that and you'll be fine."

Tracer let out a long breath but he refused to lower his stick. "Yes. Yes, I think you might be right. I'll try to calm down."

It was easier said than done. That feeling followed him, dragging every hair down his spine on end. He warred with the desire to look back and check his own tail, to search the dark for a face. Everywhere he looked he thought he saw a face. Icy eyes glowing in the distance that would vanish no sooner than he look at them.

Widget let out a couple of gasps and leant against the wall slightly. "I'm not finding that door."

"We've probably not gone the entire way around yet," Tracer explained, his voice barely a whisper.

"I dunno. I felt a corner a little while ago. Surely we didn't go that far into this building, right?"

Tracer glanced back over his shoulder, spotting those eyes again. Several. They vanished one by one, moving away from him. No… he wasn't mistaken. He really was seeing eyes.

He raised his stick and let out a flame thrower, lighting up the glossy black wall.

Bricks. The entire wall was formed out of bricks. Black bricks, uniform, not a window in sight. As for the floor, it was concrete. And tarmac. There was even a curb.

His mouth went dry and he cleared his throat. "Widget… I'm about to tell you something, and I don't want you to freak out."

"All right. Shoot."

"We're not inside a building at all." Tracer looked back up again and prepared his stick for another flamethrower. "We're inside a living creature."

"What? Pull the other one!" Widget scoffed. "How on earth does one just saunter into a living creature?"

His voice echoed wildly throughout the building, making Tracer flinch and pull his ears back. Each and every brick snapped around one by one, revealing row upon row of icy blue eyes. Each one trained onto the two pokemon, lighting up the smog with a pale blue hue.

Widget's ears drooped and he fell onto his haunches. "Oh snap…"

Tracer took a step back, struggling to focus on one pair of eyes. He kept his stick trained, ready to fight back.

"I'm open to suggestions, Widget," he said.

"I'm just gonna do what I'm good at," said the eevee. "Bust my way outta here by force."

He turned and bolted, crashing into the wall. His mechanical skeleton whined with the impact as he was launched backwards by an invisible force. Tracer aimed his stick at another wall, throwing out a flamethrower. It fizzled out before it could so much as lick the surface.

"Protect," he muttered. "So these things fight like us pokemon do, eh?"

Widget pushed himself back up and flipped onto his feet, shaking out his ruff.

"Then we fight back like pokemon," he said. "Sooner or later, it's gonna give up or faint."

Tracer let out a breath and readied another attack. "I like your optimism. Let's hope you're right."

He threw his stick forward, expelling another flamethrower. This one struck home, heating up the bricks until they lit up with a pinkish glow. The eyes span back away from the attack, protecting the lifeform's vulnerable surface. Yet it made no noise. Expressionless. No scream, no wince… nothing.

Then there was a creak. Not from any vocal chords, but from the structure itself as it shifted. Tracer aimed his flame in the direction of the noise enough to light it up, but the glowing eyes did most of the work for him. Beyond the eerie glow, he spotted a long pillar of slender bricks pushing against the ground. Daylight leaked in beneath the creature, bringing with it murky smog.

"Is it fleeing?" Widget asked all too eagerly.

Tracer said nothing, keeping his stick raised. There was every possibility they'd strolled inside it by accident, but it could just as easily have been a stealth attack. A way to trap its prey. But if its prey was fighting back, maybe it didn't think it was worth it?

The base crashed back down to the floor, shaking the ground. Rubble flew towards them faster than Tracer could raise his arms. Widget hissed with pain as the jagged rocks struck his flesh, then he shook out his ears and bared his canines.

"That's it!" the eevee roared. "Now I'm mad! Prepare to taste pain, villain!"

The small pokemon rocketed towards the creature's walls, striking it with such force the eyes almost seemed to flinch. They span away from him, the bricks whipping harmlessly at his fur. A few cracks spread across the surface, and the entire structure lurched, rising up onto four spindly legs. That's when Tracer heard it. A deep, mechanical groan that resembled a roar. Every single eye turned red, reflecting off the glossy surface. It flew into the air and aimed the nearest wall above their heads.

"Widget, move!" Tracer roared.

The pair shoulder-rolled to the side, dodging the creature's attack.

"Heavy slam?" Widget whined. "Aww, man! I've been wantin' to learn that since I got this skeleton put in place. But would they teach me? No. Why? Because I'm little!"

"This is no time to be envious, Widget," said Tracer. "This thing wants us dead."

"Yeh, and we're still inside it." Widget cleared his throat and looked up at the delphox. "Why, exactly, didn't we roll out into the city to safety?"

"Not enough room or time. We'd have been flattened."

Tracer aimed his stick and waved it, creating a blue wisp of flames. They struck the creature, lighting up a burn across the surface. It jerked away from them, scraping along the ground like claws over slate. Rubble flew in their direction, but Tracer was able to throw up

a protect in time. Widget, however, took the attack head on. He narrowed his brown eyes and threw himself recklessly at the creature. More cracks appeared in the bricks as the eyes spun away from the impact.

A roar.

Another rear up into the air.

"All right, this time, let's roll out of the creature!" Widget barked as he took off past Tracer.

The delphox turned and tucked his stick away, launching himself through the rapidly narrowing gap. The beast fell to the ground with an almighty crash, clipping his bushy tail. He yowled and tugged it away, tearing the fur and skin from the tip. But there was no time to examine the damage. The eyes flicked around so they were on the outer surface, lighting up the smog with a nightmarish red glow.

"Yup." Widget's tail slumped down behind him. "I know when I'm beat. Let's book it."

Tracer scrambled to his feet and raced after the eevee, moving away from the monster. It clattered up onto its spindly legs and trotted after them. The sight would have been comical if it weren't for the massive threat it posed. Widget ducked into an alley and Tracer squeezed in behind him, dodging overflowing trash bags and haphazard trash cans. Sticky slime coated up to his ankles as he clambered through unidentifiable sludge to come out of the other end. There was no way it could follow them through there. But it did mean they ended up even more lost than they had been previously.

"This way!" Widget took a sharp right.

Tracer didn't need telling twice. He scrambled after the eevee, trying in vain to ignore the pulsing pain in his tail. The wounded limb found its way into his paws, rendering balancing a difficult act. Through the smog, he could just make out a tall mast. The decorative flag that

marked Beta City's docks. His heart lurched into his throat, and he released his tail to catch up with the vanishing eevee.

N0ize looked up as the pair raced towards him. He opened his mouth to speak, but Tracer waved him off.

"Get back in the ship!" he roared.

"What's the problem?" N0ize asked. "Run into that Kraken?"

"You could say that." Widget glanced over his shoulder.

All eyes went to the hulking monster as it crushed its way between the buildings. N0ize's jaw dropped and he ushered Cyph3r onto the ship. The two space pirates rushed ahead of the detectives, but not before the magmortar fired a shot at the creature. The railgun's hidden bullet struck the brick surface, punching a hole through it and bringing the beast to a halt.

The ship's door began to close before Tracer was even fully on board. He scrambled between the door, clutching his tail in one paw. Sticky blood clung to the fur of his paws and matted his tail, but he was more interested in the creature. It hadn't completely stopped. It reared itself up for an attack, crashing back down as the ship rose into the air. Rocks rained down towards them, striking the ship's hull harmlessly.

"Huh." N0ize scratched his nose. "Persistent thing, ain't it? It ain't what were described to me, either. How many are there?"

"That wasn't the Kraken?" Widget gasped. "What on earth was it then?"

"Got me," said N0ize. "Thing they described to me were some black dragon with a mouth in its gut. Eats buildings."

Tracer's mind went back to the huge chunks missing from the buildings. That explained the distinct lack of pokemon. They'd likely

fled, or met a horrendous fate.

N0ize looked down at the detective and frowned. "What on earth happened to your tail, fuzz?"

Tracer gingerly touched the wounded tip and hissed. That was going to need some quick treatment. Maybe even a course of antibiotics. Goodness knows what got into it as he scrambled through that alley.

"Here." N0ize reached into his dashboard and pulled out a black scarf with a neon green trim that closely resembled the chipboard tattoo around Widget's eye. "Get it bandaged up. It's enough you're gettin' grime on the floor, never mind blood. Now… dare I ask if you got that bracer?"

Tracer's muzzle creased into a frown and he turned his attention to binding up his skinned tail tip.

"No, we didn't," said Widget. "We were kinda pre-occupied with that monster."

N0ize scoffed and swivelled on his chair, kicking his huge feet up onto the dash. "Well, good job we patched up the broken one then, eh?"

"What?" Widget squeaked. "How'd ya do that?!"

N0ize grinned from ear to ear over his shoulder. "Gotta love duck tape."

…

Cyan City looked no different. Macro wasn't sure why he'd even expected it to, they'd only been away for two days at most. Maybe it was merely the awareness that Surge was held captive in the city, giving him a sense of unease.

Heatsink, Floppy and Torrent stood at the docks waiting for them, the dome wide open to greet the huge ship. Once it was inside, it closed

behind it narrowly missing the wishiwashi's tail rudder.

"'Bout time you came back!" Floppy barked as Macro clambered off his ship. "Had Jumper in a right worry."

"I can look after myself." Macro regretted the words no sooner than they left his mouth.

"Really?" Floppy appeared rather taken aback, his ears almost pulled back against his head. "And what about your assassin, eh? We've got her apprehended behind bars, and I'm gonna bet every credit I own that you had no clue she was even here!"

"Come off it, Floppy," Heatsink scolded him. "If she's as good as her reputation says, of course he wouldn't know she was here."

The vaporeon glanced back at the empoleon then fixed a pleading look on Torrent. The quagsire diverted his eyes to the glass dome and began whistling a nonchalant tune.

Floppy sighed, turning back to Macro. He cocked an eyebrow as he looked between him and his ship. "Where's the pachirisu?"

Macro said nothing, moving aside so Anchor could clamber off the ladder. When the silence had gone on for longer than ideal, the granbull cleared his throat and gave Macro a sideways glance.

"I'll tell you everythin'," he said, "so long as you lend me a paw draggin' what's left of Surge's ship outta the cargo bay?"

"What's left of it?" Heatsink's beak fell wide open. "What happened?"

"Long story," said Anchor.

"But we can tell it in five minutes," added Matrix.

"Come off it!" said Anchor. "You just want to get to the arcade."

The ribombee didn't look up from his computer. "You know me so well."

"Go then," said Anchor. "These kind pokemon will help me, while you burn out your retinas with another VR game."

Matrix buzzed over their heads towards the city.

The police force's eyes lingered on Macro for a moment, then moved past him towards Anchor as he fumbled around Wildcard Gamma's jaws to open them. Macro gave the granbull a nod, then left his ship at the docks and went straight to the police station. He wanted to get to the bottom of what was going to become of the zigzagoon. Part of him wanted to make sure she stayed exactly where she was, that way he'd know she wasn't tailing after him. But there was also the unnerving possibility she'd break free and hunt him down while his back was turned.

He marched into the town hall, giving the blastoise on duty a curt nod and receiving one in return. Jumper's office door was wide open and he looked up with some surprise.

"Macro!" he said. "I saw your ship coming in but I didn't think you'd come-"

"So what's gonna happen to her?"

"Who?" Jumper glanced over the mawile's head to the door then back at him. "Surge?"

"Yes." A lone canine poked out between his lips.

"Well…" Jumper cleared his throat and motioned for Macro to take a seat. "I have you know that while she stays here in my custody, no harm is to befall her."

"So she's still here? Then you won't mind me havin' a little word with her." Macro turned to the door.

"Wait!"

Jumper's voice froze him in the doorway.

"Macro, I need to tell you something," he said. "She wasn't working alone here, so if you'll take a seat, I can tell you what I know."

Macro looked back at the frogadier over his shoulder. So she wasn't working alone? Cyan City suddenly felt a lot colder. He silently marched over to the offered chair and climbed into it, prompting Jumper to explain himself with a look.

"I don't know what's got into you," said Jumper, "but I won't have you just marching about like that, like you own the place."

"I had a bad trip," said Macro. "I don't really wanna talk about it. And knowin' she's here, causing problems-"

"I understand that." Jumper gave him a sympathetic nod. "But like I said, she wasn't working alone. We've got the conspirator locked in another cell, so he won't be causing any issues for you. But I can't say the news hasn't caused a little unrest. I'm not sure how many pokemon are going to be willing to hand you over to Socket here now, and I'm trying to hammer down some laws. Hopefully having this individual locked away will make a statement. You and your crew did save this city, and I expect a little gratitude from my citizens."

Macro sighed and rubbed his scar. "And she caused that?"

"She was a catalyst," said Jumper. "But I am given to understand she contacted Socket while she was here. Sent her some information."

Macro looked up slowly and narrowed his eyes. "What kind of information?"

"From what she told me, it was evidence that DL was in this city. Apparently Socket was meant to have shut her down."

"Then she lied to you."

"Lied?"

"Yes. Lied." Macro slid from his seat. "Surge was the one who revived DL, so I don't know why she'd have told her that. I reckon she's up to somethin', and given Socket's stuck a price on her head it gives me a bad feeling. Let me speak to her."

"You think you can get the truth out of her?"

"Don't know. But I can try."

Jumper nodded and followed Macro out into the square towards the police station. Due to the pleasant weather, the doors were wide open.

"You said you had a bad trip," said Jumper. "Did you manage to get what you were looking for?"

"Oh, I got it all right," said Macro.

"That's good."

"Depends on your perspective on 'good'."

Macro stopped by the cells and folded his arms, waiting for Jumper to unlock them. But the frogadier stared down at him, mouth agape.

"You gonna let me in?" Macro nodded at the door.

"Macro, what happened?"

The mawile waved him off. "I said I don't wanna talk about it."

"Macro…"

"Socket screwed me over!" Macro snapped. "Made it very easy. Turns out that memory disk made DL very aware of who I am. You

ever hear about what happened in Botnet City?"

Jumper's mouth flapped open and closed like a goldeen gasping for air. He snapped it shut then cleared his throat, diverting his gaze from the steaming mawile.

"I am so sorry…"

"Forget it." Macro waved a paw then crossed his arms again, leaning heavily against the wall.

The frogadier scanned him into the room then stood aside. "I'll be waiting right here if you need me."

Macro said nothing, marching into the cells. Most of the glass cells were empty save for a few miscreants. They fixed leering eyes on him as he strolled past them, scouting out the zigzagoon. He found her huddled against the back wall of her cell, and her pale brown eyes lifted up to his as he paused in front of it.

A dry chuckle left her throat and she shifted so she was sitting more casually. "Here to bail me out?"

"Not on your life," he scoffed. "At least if you're here, you're not gonna be pointing a laser at my back."

"Pity. We'd make a pretty good team." She folded her arms and glanced behind him. "Where's your shadow?"

Macro clenched his jaw and rapped the glass to drag her attention back to him. "Forget about DL, it's me you're talkin' to. What information did you send to Socket?"

She sighed and looked back at him. "Did that little frog send you in here to do his work for him?"

"No, I'm here because my latest memory rescue plan went a little too easily." He leant forwards so his nose was almost touching the glass. "And I have a sneaky suspicion you had somethin' to do with it."

"What makes you think I had a paw in it? You're the one who stole Download Database."

"And you're the one who crawled in over your head taking on my job to hack into Socket's computers which - lo and behold! - she found out about. Now you're tryin' to save your skin. Am I right?"

She stared back at him, unreadable. "You make it sound like you're the reason I'm scrambling for my life." A smirk tugged at the corner of her lips. "Feeling a little guilt there, cutie?"

He flashed his canines and hammered his right paw onto the glass, creating an almighty clang. The zigzagoon's fur stood on end slightly, but she tried to hide it by keeping her eyes fixed on his, unshaken.

"Just answer my question!" he barked.

She sighed and shifted her weight against the wall. "Good grief, no need to yell. Fine, I did send her some information. I thought I should let Socket know, given she's DL's adoptive mother, that her daughter was all good and well in Cyan City."

Macro's jaw went slack. "How did you know about that?"

"It was all over the files I hacked," she explained.

"And you never thought to tell me?"

"It was irrelevant given the circumstances."

"It was incredibly relevant!"

"How? Because she included her daughter in some nightmare of a scheme? Come on, Macro. The only important facts were that she turned a living being into a computer. Whether or not she was adopted was completely irrelevant."

"If System finds out their Mayor turned her own 'adopted daughter' into a mindless computer, she'd be thrown out of power for sure!"

"Bit late for that, hon. She's already bailed on System, leaving us fighting an alien invasion. Which, let's face it, you came out of pretty badly."

He flashed another canine but shrugged off her comment, turning to leave the cell. "So… you ratted out her location. I guess that wasn't what twigged Socket off into basically giving me that memory disk."

"Just gave it to you, huh?" Surge leant forwards on her knees, scanning the area behind Macro again. "Hmm… I'm guessing that went pretty badly too then? Otherwise, you wouldn't be here barking at me."

He froze and looked back at her. Clearly she was hiding something. He could tell by the way she nervously combed her claws through the fur on her head. He narrowed his eyes and stifled a low growl.

"What did you send her, Surge?" He tried to keep his voice as calm as he could, but a small snarl still slipped out as he said her name.

"I already told you."

"I'm beginning to think it was a little more than just a phone call. I also hear you weren't workin' alone."

"Okay, you got me," she sighed. "I had a little spy take some photos."

A chill ran down his spine and he fixed her in a violet glare. Words failed him.

"Let's just say," she said slowly, "that Socket is pretty aware of you two." Another smirk. "All snuggled up on the bench by the lake-"

Macro's paw flew to his laser and he fired straight at the glass. The green beam seared his fur as it ricocheted off it and struck the cell behind him. It bounced back and forth down the corridor like some crazed, out of control laser show until it struck the door, leaving an ugly black mark wherever it had hit. Panicked voices erupted from

the criminals as they scrambled around their cells. His shoulders rose and fell as he tried to calm himself, and he let his laser clatter to the floor.

Surge let out a bitter chuckle. "Pity the glass is there, huh?"

He caught her eye just beyond the seared glass.

The zigzagoon shifted and a smirk crossed her muzzle. "I'd rather die at your paws than Socket's."

Macro was speechless. His legs trembled so much he had to lean against the wall to stop from falling over. It wasn't meant to be a head shot. Just a warning shot. But the position of that mark, if the glass hadn't been there, he'd have shot her head on. He finally sank to the ground, retrieving his discarded weapon.

"What's going on in here?" Jumper strolled between the cells, eyeing the burn marks on the glass. Then his eye fell on Macro's laser and his face fell. "Macro, really-?"

Macro popped his laser back in its holster. "Let's just say I found out exactly what I needed to." He gave Surge another glance before moving past the governor.

It had been her. She was the reason Socket had tricked him into taking that disk. It had been some elaborate ploy to get DL out of his paws, and whether or not Surge knew the severity of the situation was irrelevant.

But it had been intended. Socket had wanted to split them up. She'd wanted them both vulnerable. DL out of his paws and an easy target, and as for Macro…

He stared down at his laser. One shot. That was all it would have taken to kill Surge in the heat of his anger. Yes… Socket had wanted to break him, and she'd succeeded.

…

A/N - Please R&R! =D

Chapter 66

A/N - This is a bit of a filler chapter. I'm not entirely sure how happy I am with it, but it's a lot of stuff that needed addressing really, otherwise they'd end up forgotten about. Particularly Time Archeops stuff. I hope it's okay, but any suggestions are welcome.

Thanks again for all reviews, faves and follows!

Chapter Sixty Six

Macro's head was spinning.

He lay on his back, one arm over his eyes, as he ran over everything in his mind. Everything from the beginning. From the moment they found DL all the way to his breakdown in front of Surge. Why? Where had he gone wrong? When he found the pachirisu? Or the moment he trusted Surge to help them? Space pirates weren't meant to trust others outside their own crew, and even then they were meant to keep them at arm's length. He wasn't one to trust so freely. Not usually. But recently…

He grimaced, screwing his eyes shut. All it had brought him was pain. One foot wrong, and everything fell apart. No… where he'd gone wrong was in Binary City. That mission he wished he'd never taken. That one mistake that had Socket panting for his life. He should have just turned himself in, given himself a chance to explain everything. But instead he'd fled like a coward. Not even given anyone an apology. Not even the pichu he'd saved.

"You need to drag yourself out of this hole." The voice made Macro's spine stiffen. "Because it's exactly where she wants you."

He lifted his arm and glanced to his right. Taking up most of his room was a huge white lion, his mane radiating a soft light that seemed to

brighten up the dinginess Macro had locked himself in.

"What…? Solgaleo?" Macro pushed himself up onto one arm. "What are you doing here? Who let you in?"

The huge lion merely smiled. A smile that lifted some of the weight off Macro. He pushed himself up and positioned himself against the headboard. He rubbed his eyes to remove the grogginess and soothe the heavy bags beneath them.

"I'm here because you clearly need someone," said Solgaleo. "I can't deny what's happened isn't crushing, Macro, but you really need to look at the bigger picture."

"What? System?" Macro lowered his paw to look at him. "I wanna ask what this world has ever done for me?"

"You live in it." It was a simple answer that made the mawile sigh. "So do your friends. Don't let the pawful of bad pokemon drag you down. There are a lot of pokemon relying on you right now. Even if they don't know it."

"But why me?" Macro whined, leaning his head back against the wall. "I'm in no state for this. I almost got killed!"

"A lot of good pokemon have died in the past by trying to stop the bad ones."

"Yeh? Then what happened to them?"

"They're with me."

Macro looked up with a start, fixing wide violet eyes on Solgaleo's warm blue ones.

"I chose you for a reason," Solgaleo explained. "You're against Socket, you refuse to eat meat, and you want to save DL. To top it all off, you helped Switch. That human is a hero, and one your distant

relatives are very close to. You're descended from someone gifted the power to make a difference."

"Yeh, but did he kill hundreds of pokemon in a fire?" Macro growled.

"That was an accident."

"Accident or not, I did it! And look where it's got me!" Macro spread his paws wide. "I have a huge price on my head, and I hurt someone I truly care about. I killed her family!"

"And she knows it was an accident." Solgaleo paused, fixing his calming eyes on Macro's. "You even went out of your way to save that little pichu. In his eyes, you're a hero."

Macro's eyes welled up and he tore them away to wipe at them.

"You are not a bad pokemon," said Solgaleo. "You're one of few space pirates fighting for the greater good, despite what mask you hide behind. I want you to use that good, and put an end to this mess."

"And what will you do?" Macro asked flatly.

"I'll be working through you."

Macro's eye went to the Z-Crystal around his wrist. Was it sparkling? If it was, it was brief. Enough to catch his eye.

"You will never be alone, even if you feel like you are," said Solgaleo. "I'll be right there, like I have been this whole time." He reached out and tapped the Z-Crystal.

Macro chuckled and shook his head. "And only a couple of weeks ago, I was a common criminal."

"Even pirates can become heroes," Solgaleo said with a smile. "Now get out there and make a difference."

"But what about DL?" Macro's voice broke slightly at her name.

"She's safe. But you need to get to her quickly. Not just her, but the pokemon she is with all need their Z-Crystals."

"What?" Macro's jaw dropped. "She… she's found them?"

Solgaleo smiled again. "Funny how things work out, isn't it?"

With that, he slowly faded away. But Macro's room still felt much brighter and warmer from the lion's presence. He kicked his legs over the edge of his bed and clambered off it. All grogginess had faded, and with it the threat of a dull headache. In fact, he felt a lot better than he had in years.

He hopped off his ship and made a beeline for the lake. Anchor and Floppy were engaged in sparring practice while Matrix 'watched' from a nearby bench. The granbull looked up when he spotted Macro and his eyes widened.

"Cap'n!" He grinned. "You're lookin' a lot better."

"Aye," said Macro. "Turned out all I needed was a little pep talk."

Anchor stared at him wordlessly as he tried to process what he'd said.

Macro looked down at the vaporeon. "Aren't you meant to be with the rest of the police force?"

"Yeah." Floppy rolled his eyes. "But Jumper said, given Switch is away, I'm to take his place in sparring practice."

"We have Matrix." Macro waved a paw at the ribombee.

"Matrix has already burned out his use of the Z-Crystal," the ribombee said, not looking up from his computer. "And he doesn't want to be a tiny punching bag."

Macro tutted and shook his head.

Floppy inclined his head on one side and his eye went to Macro's Z-Crystal. "So I guess you're joining us then?"

"Yeh, I am." Macro clenched his fist and looked at each of them. "Now show me how to use this thing. Faster I learn, faster we can stop Socket and get these Ultra Beasts back home."

"That's what I wanna hear!" Anchor grinned widely and held his bracelet over his head. "Now, I've only managed to do this like… twice. But just like Solgaleo said - you hold it over your head just before you perform your attack. But… it ain't as easy as it sounds."

"I don't really get it," said Floppy. "Like I said, I've been appointed 'Official Punching Bag' while work is slow. But those moves look super tough. I'm a little sad I've not seen it in action, yet at the same time a little bitter I can't try it myself."

Anchor laughed. "Ah, don't be like that!"

Macro's heart sank slightly. He looked from the granbull's Z-Crystal to his own. The pink crystal reflected sunlight even from deep within it, contrasting with the fairy type symbol it bore. So it wasn't going to be easy. Well… he'd keep practising until it became easy. System was relying on Wildcard Gamma and their unsuspecting allies. Even if it meant he'd have no sleep for a week, he was going to keep on trying.

"All right, well… I'll give it a shot." He flexed his claws and turned to his friends. "Brace yourself, Floppy. I'm comin' at you."

"What?" Floppy's black eyes shot wide open. "Why me?"

"Because you said you've been told to be our punching bag, now get ready."

Matrix chuckled. "I'm just glad it's not me. Otherwise I'd be wishing I'd gone with Defrag to grab a donut."

"Defrag?" Macro stiffened and looked at Anchor. "Digit's been joining you?"

"She's stuck here and pretty bored, Cap'n," Anchor explained. "She's been sparring with us since Switch isn't available anymore. Kinda as a favour so we'll give her a lift back to System Ground."

"All right." Macro shrugged and turned back to Floppy. "You ready?"

He lifted his paw into the air then leapt towards Floppy, spinning his horn around like a windmill. Floppy braced himself, lowering his head as he ducked to dodge. Macro opened the jaws to grab the vaporeon by the tail, but before he could make contact, his body lit up with a pink glow. Floppy's black eyes reflected a sparkle Macro couldn't see, and his jaw dropped open as the mawile picked up rapid speed. Before the vaporeon could jump out of the way, Macro crashed into him, knocking all the wind out of Floppy's lungs with a sound reminiscent of a hatchling's squeak-toy. Pink and white stars exploded around them, lighting up the lake with a flash like lightning. The pair rolled into the bench in a tangle of fur and tail. Macro pulled himself back and fell onto his bottom, his breath coming in quick bursts. His surprise reflected in Floppy's eyes as the winded vaporeon pulled himself up so he was sitting.

"So…" said Floppy. "That's a Z-Move?"

"Interesting." Matrix wound his antenna as he peered at Macro between Floppy's ears. "Shame I wasn't really watching. I should have taken notes."

Macro's eyes flew to the Z-Crystal. Somehow, it wasn't reflecting the light quite so brightly. Well, it definitely hadn't been 'play rough'.

"And we finally get to see Twinkle Tackle!" Anchor clapped his paws together in an applaud that sounded deafening in the suddenly silent

park. "Well done, Cap'n. Put us all to shame!"

No… it wasn't meant to be that easy. If his crew were struggling, then why would he manage it on his first try? Surely it was just a fluke?

"Hey, I'm back." Defrag strolled towards them clutching a sugared donut. She froze mid-bite and looked at the space pirates in turn. "Oh great. What did I miss?"

Something caught Macro's eye and he looked up at the glass dome. A small twinkle beyond the clouds. He chuckled and fell onto his back, pressing a paw over his eyes.

Of course. A little pep talk. 'Make a difference'. Somehow, things didn't feel quite so bleak.

…

Binary City pulsed with music. Dusk was on the horizon, and the streets were already alive with neon lights, swinging back and forth as the band played their music. Well… 'band' was a bit of a stretch. On the stage was a holographic display of the animated band playing to their audience, singing in their synthetic voices. Behind them on a huge screen, each song's music video played out much to the delight of the audience. Pokemon bounced up and down, a huge mish-mash of typings unusual to see throughout System. All brought together by the love of entertainment and the band Neon Blue.

A group of smaller pokemon made up of sentret, skitty and purrloin danced around the more unusual guest. The lanky creature's movements were oddly graceful despite its appearance, and it removed its eyeless head to juggle back and forth in its arms. Every so often it would pause to fire off a volley of fireballs, each time eliciting cheers from the mosh pit. The fire types would add their own pyrotechnics, throwing up flamethrowers from their mouths and paws. Then the electric types would join in with their light display, lighting up the stage.

"Bleh." BackDoor floated above the rabble with his paws tucked behind his head. "Not quite the chaos I was expecting it to cause."

'Then it's a failure?' Distortion's voice rumbled in his head. 'It should be destroyed.'

"That would be pretty fun to watch play out," said BackDoor. "Man, when I saw that thing appear, I wondered where it had got to. I didn't expect it to be clowning around in Binary City, making friends. These things are meant to destroy, right?"

'They're useless lifeforms, just like the rest of the creatures here. Look at them, dancing to a fictitious display. I want to end it.'

BackDoor let out an 'eep!' as his body was dragged like a meteor towards the mosh pit. He froze above it abruptly, drawing a few eyes from the pokemon below. Claws pointed, faces turned, all eager to see the hoopa. Then Distortion left his body in a cloud of mist, his insectoid form slowly solidifying beside him. Distortion opened his red eyes, glowing like embers out of his misty body. His shape spasmed erratically as it struggled to maintain one form - insectoid or dragon.

Screams erupted from the audience as the more timid pokemon tried to scramble away, but those that stayed were either amazed or bracing themselves for a fight. The more intoxicated laughed, thinking it was all part of the show. A few of them even paused to take photos.

Distortion narrowed his eyes. "Foolish creatures. It's almost a waste of my strength to erase you from existence."

He opened his mouth, sending out a pulse of purple energy. It spread over the mosh pit, setting fur, feather and scale ablaze. More screams, more desperate scrambling as those left remaining realised what peril they were in. Distortion's dragon pulse spread across the floor, splitting the concrete as it caught up with the stragglers.

The lanky Ultra Beast leapt from its spot, throwing itself between the dragon pulse and an injured sentret. It removed its colourful head, bouncing it up and down in its paw like a basket ball. The sentret scurried away, casting a nervous glance between the two warring Ultra Beasts.

"So you're fearless?" Distortion asked the creature. "Given you're willing to throw your life away to protect a creature that would no sooner turn its back and run, I'd say that behaviour is foolish."

The creature dropped into a battle stance, juggling its huge head between its paws. The lights flickering inside it turned a vivid red. It aimed it towards Distortion.

The dragon opened his mouth to fire out another dragon pulse. It soared towards the Ultra Beast. The Ultra Beast flicked a paw, sending a shadow ball that exploded against the dragon pulse, cancelling it out. Before Distortion could retaliate, its huge head left its paw with surprising force. It exploded against Distortion's body into sparkles and flames. He threw his head back and roared as his body began to lose its solidity, melding into mist.

BackDoor tutted. "Feisty fellow, isn't he?"

Distortion's eyes glowed from deep within the mist, fixing on BackDoor.

'This world…' His voice came out as an echo in BackDoor's head, 'is not stable enough to hold me!' He retreated back into BackDoor's body, causing the android to jerk uncomfortably. 'It needs distorting. But first… I need to distort you.'

"Who, me?" BackDoor pointed a thumb at his chest.

A 'whoop!' left his throat as his entire body rocketed into the air, barely dodging another shadow ball from the Ultra Beast. At some point, it had regained its head, still pulsing with red light. Although it appeared a lot smaller than its previous one. Was it… growing?

Before he could get a decent look, his body twisted so he was looking over Binary City. Distortion fell silent, but he could feel him moving around his wires and components. Creeping like a tiny scolipede… or a seviper.

'Yes…' he hissed. 'Yes, I think I've found it. A worm. Something I can distort.'

The words sent a chill through BackDoor's body. Before he could retaliate, Distortion latched onto something. BackDoor's mind began to spin, and he sprayed out a series of nonsense commands that could have baffled even Zero Day. His body twisted, creaking as the metal re-built itself. Stretching as he increased in size. No… he wasn't organic. His body wasn't designed for such feats. He screwed his eyes shut, bracing himself to explode. Why, oh why, wasn't he built with a self-destruct command?

Then it all stopped.

He opened his eyes again, looking down at his body. Twisted almost beyond recognition. Six arms floated beside him, three at each side. A huge ring-like hole expanded across his torso. He even had legs, and behind him, a tail. He lifted a paw and flexed it, admiring his new claws.

"Hey," he said, his voice no different than before. "They're no longer like mittens."

'This is a much better fit.' If Distortion had heard him, he didn't show it. 'Now… time to erase that Ultra Beast.'

BackDoor found himself launched once more towards the ground. He reached up and grabbed a ring from around his right horn and lobbed it towards the creature. It leapt back, dodging it as it spread open before it. Then it flailed as the porthole tried to drag it in.

'A world without air. Without atmosphere.' Distortion laughed. 'This will be your end!'

The Ultra Beast snapped its head up towards them. Then it kicked off from the ground, diving over the porthole. Another lob of its head. Another explosion. Searing heat spread over BackDoor's body. His scream melded with Distortion's as they were blown back through the city. He hit the floor hard, feeling a crack explode along his back.

When he opened his eyes, it was pitch black. He searched through his mind, finding a substantial chunk of time missing from his memory logs. He rubbed his head with a mitten paw and twisted his neck back and forth. Yes, something had indeed cracked open. Sparks erupted from his back as he drifted into the air, wobbling left and right as he searched the city. Both the Ultra Beast and the porthole had vanished.

"Drat." His voice cracked and distorted, stuttering over the final 't'. "I think-k-k we lost it."

A deep growl echoed in his head and he rolled his eyes back to search for the dragon. But he couldn't see a thing. Not even his red, glowing eyes.

'You are weak,' Distortion hissed. 'I need a stronger host. Find me one.'

…

Trojan kicked the side of the pyukumyuku, creating a deep ring that caused Switch to cover his ears with his wings.

"Piece of junk just wont fly!" the scrafty roared.

"Well it wont if you kick it like that, will it?" Annie placed her hands on her hips and leant towards him. "Would you fly if I kicked you?"

Trojan looked from her booted foot all the way up to her eyes and frowned. "I might. You're pretty big."

Annie cocked an eyebrow. "I'm not sure whether that was an insult or not. Hang on." She looked over her shoulder. "Oi, Web! Was that an insult?"

The skuntank didn't look up from her cooking. "Perhaps. It is Trojan."

Annie turned back to him and pointed a finger at her eye, then at the scrafty. She turned and headed back to Web, who was busying herself beside DL and Zip.

Switch sighed and strolled over to them. The previous night had been pretty quiet, and it was rapidly growing darker. Without any streetlights, they needed to rely on a pair of dusty torches, one of which seemed to enjoy flickering on and off at random intervals. The one that didn't flicker had been fixed to Zip's right leg.

"I don't think we'll be flying tonight," Switch told DL.

The pachirisu looked up at him with a sombre expression and nodded, turning back to her task of vegetable slicing.

"I figured as much," she said. "But argh… we need to leave this mountain soon. We have a job to do."

"Aye, the rebellion!" Annie called from beside a razz bush. She'd sprawled herself out on the floor, oblivious to the prickles. "As much as I like lookin' at these stars, I'm itching to get movin' again."

"Aye, it might not be too long before those space pirates realise we ain't dead," said Trojan. "Sooner we leave this mountain, the better."

Something caught Switch's eye and he turned to his right as Waveform swooped silently down towards them. A quick flick of his wings and he landed with a flourish, dropping something beside Trojan.

"What's this?" the scrafty asked him.

"A few bolts and a stabiliser," said Waveform. "Also salvaged some parts from the drones I shot down. Might fix the engine compatibility."

"What are you? A jack of all trades?"

"I'm just itching to move." Waveform tucked his wings to his side and strutted past them towards Annie, casting Switch a curious glance.

Web looked up at them then glanced around the mountain. "I'm not so much worried about those pirates than I am about Socket. This mountain is off limits, so we're trespassing."

"You're worried about trespassin'? With all we're doin'?" Trojan shook his head and ended his statement with a 'hah!'

Web frowned. "Well, now we know why it's off limits. It's one of few places with natural fruit trees and - lo and behold - a spring!"

Zip wagged his tail. "Yeah! I get clean water!"

"We could technically live here," said Web. "Yet she's keeping it to herself."

"And not living here," said Switch. "Why is that, exactly?"

"I thought that was obvious." Web narrowed her eyes at him. "At the expense of her own enjoyment, nobody learns about it. Instead, she could use it as a secret getaway. I'm guessing the other mayors did just that. She's just a nervous wreck who won't leave her mansion except for serious circumstances."

Switch folded his arms and frowned. "So you have an agoraphobic mayor?"

"You could say that, yes."

As the night grew gradually darker, the smell of Web's cooking surrounded the ship. Trojan worked away at the engine, but as the smell tickled his nose, he clambered out and wiped oil onto a rag.

"About time," he said. "I was gettin' hungry."

"Well, I hope you all enjoy it," said Web. "Thanks to DL and Zip, we've managed to find berries I've never even tasted before."

Trojan froze and held up his paws. "Hang on. It ain't poisonous, is it?"

"Only if you're allergic to figy berries," said Web.

Trojan rubbed his throat then sat down. "Don't think I've ever had them."

The group tucked into their meals, sharing banter and stories, mostly aimed at Switch. He went off on a tangent, talking about the events with the Fracture that Web and Trojan were particularly interested in. Waveform was also hooked, but Annie was more interested in the contents of her bowl. She scraped the remains into her mouth then looked around at her crew. Then she stretched her arms out and yawned.

"Well, I'm gonna continue stargazin'."

She stood up and returned to the razz bush, flopping onto her back on the lumpy ground. A stone jabbed her in the spine and she shifted until she grabbed it, then tossed it into the distance. It collided with something soft. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a feathery form slump down beside her.

She fixed one eye on Waveform, who had removed his quiver to polish his silver arrows.

"So, whaddaya think?" She knocked a thumb towards the nattering group. "Another human?"

Waveform shrugged. "It certainly answers more questions. Particularly about the Fracture and that yes, some humans did indeed stay behind and mix with pokemon."

Annie yawned again and tucked her arms behind her head. "Kinda removes my 'special' status."

"You can be special in the eyes of others without being unique."

"Are those lyrics from a song?"

Waveform fixed an eye on her. "Not one I know of."

"Maybe you should write it?"

He lowered his arrows and looked down at her, a glimmer of amusement in his crimson eyes. She looked away from him to the arrows then nodded at them.

"Why do you use them anyway?" she asked. "I thought decidueye make their own arrows."

"We do." He returned one polished arrow to his quiver then retrieved another. "But I prefer it this way."

"More deadly?"

"More convenient."

"But you didn't take them into Pulse City?"

"That's because they're a bit of a trademark," he explained. "I hunt space pirates, and space pirates know for a fact a silver arrow means Waveform."

"So it's bounty-hunting bling then?"

He froze and looked down at her, cocking an eyebrow. She flipped herself up onto her bottom and fixed him with an emerald gaze.

"Look, I've read alotta books," she said. "And I know pokemon all make their own attacks. Nature is a pretty thing, and you don't need all this glitz and glam." She waved a hand at his armoured beak and

silver quiver. "Wherever I look in this crazy, whacked-out world, pokemon have weapons and mechanical body parts. Like that magmortar in Pulse City, and all them 'mons with guns. How can trusting a finite weapon be more convenient than producing your own? Seriously, just… take it off and be a pokemon!"

Waveform's face fell and he narrowed his eyes. "I thought you didn't remember much about Pulse City?"

"I remember that magmortar and the big pussycat."

He tutted and returned to his arrows. "Your memory seems to be very convenient to you."

"It ain't remotely convenient," she said. "And don't change the subject! Decidueye in my books were these amazing owls that fired arrows from their vines. You fit the bill - flying silently, using your vine. But you don't use your own arrows and you keep your beak covered up with some kinda ornament. What's the deal?"

He stopped what he was doing and set the rag aside, not looking at her. "Why are you bringing this up now?"

"'Cos I feel I now know you enough to call you out on these shenanigans."

"Shenanigans?" He placed his arrows to one side and swivelled to face her. "Not all pokemon use modifications as a fashion statement, Annie. They're also used for medical reasons. Replacing missing body parts, protecting against disease. You've seen the outskirts and what damage it can do. It slowly kills the pokemon unfortunate enough to live there."

"Well, yeh. I mean Zip can't walk on land. But when he goes back to the water, he won't need them legs!"

"You haven't taken in anything I've said, have you." He shook his head. "Zip might not need them, yet there are some pokemon that

do need mechanical legs."

She scratched her chin and looked up at the stars. "Yeh, I guess some do. But!" She pointed at him. "Surely they don't need some fancy beak ornament. Come on, I can barely see your face properly with that on."

He sighed and grabbed an arrow, idly polishing it as she stared at him. She shifted forward until her arm brushed up against his wing, causing his feathers to stand on end.

"Annie, I really think you need to drop this conversation."

"I'll drop it when I see your face."

The decidueye sighed loudly. "Fine."

He tossed the arrows to one side and reached up, grabbing the armour between two of his paw-feathers. There was an audible click and he pulled it away, keeping both eyes on Annie.

Around his beak had been rubbed raw by the metal until his feathers had been brushed away. Bloody in parts. But what it had been hiding turned Annie's throat dry. Around the corners of his beak and nostrils were unsightly lumps, some of which trickled blood from having the armour removed.

"Happy?" he asked.

She stared at him for a bit longer as he replaced the metal sheath. Her mind went back to that dry, brittle feather. It all made so much sense. She balled her hand into a fist so tightly her nails dug into her palms.

"No." The word came out so calmly, yet in her mind she was screaming.

She pushed herself to her feet and turned, walking away into the shadows.

…

The soft hum of Wildcard Gamma's engine soothed Macro into a light slumber. He sat back in his chair, arms tucked behind his head and feet up on the dashboard. Stars swept past them at a steady pace as the ship drifted on in silence, miles over System Sky. It was a peaceful place Macro had enjoyed visiting long before all the chaos had happened.

Soft footsteps dragged him out of his doze and he glanced back over his chair. DL stood in the doorway, winding her paws together as she glanced around at the cockpit. His jaw dropped and he dragged himself from his seat.

"DL?"

Her eyes went to him and immediately all tension left her body. She ran towards him, throwing her arms around his neck. He felt her nuzzling into his fur as she pushed his scarf aside, her breath tickling his neck. It ignited a tingle in his stomach and he pulled her close, covering her shoulder with soft kisses.

"Oh, I've missed you," he said.

"Me too," she sighed.

She combed her claws through his fur, trailing them up his spine, and she pulled back from him to catch his lips in a kiss. A small groan left his throat as he returned it. Tears stung his eyes and flowed down his cheeks and he couldn't help but pull her closer, stumbling into the back of his seat. He brushed his paw over her ears, her fur warm against his pads, down the back of her head. His claws trailed over the jack socket and his heart began to ache.

He pulled back from her to take a breath, to spill out his feelings to her. He met those chocolate eyes. But they weren't warm. Instead, they were sad. Pained. Reflecting fire that burned behind him. All around him. He panicked, stumbling backwards as his eyes flew

around the cockpit. All feeling left his legs. He grabbed the arm of his chair to stop himself from slumping to the floor.

Fire.

It erupted between them like a barrier, spreading across the floor beneath her. He stretched out a paw towards her, to drag her from the inferno, but the floor began to splinter. Debris crumbled away from the cockpit, threatening to take DL with it. But she didn't seem to notice or care. Her body shook as the disaster caught up with her.

"Goodbye." Her voice seemed to echo eerily, as though it hadn't come from her.

"No!" He watched her fall away from him into the abyss below. "No, DL! Don't go! I love you!"

He threw himself forwards into the flames, scattering the sheets off his body.

Dawn.

He blinked a few times, trying to dispel the nightmare from his mind and enter reality.

His bed. No fire. A tangle of sheets sticky with sweat. Just another nightmare. He groaned and ran a paw over his head, then flailed an arm towards his nightstand for his computer. His heart was still racing. Those nightmares… he knew they weren't real, but he needed to know DL was okay. That they were all okay.

He brought up Switch's name with his trembling claw then fired out a disjointed message. He didn't care what time it was, he just wanted to know. Once it was sent, he fell back into his pillow and rubbed a paw over his eyes. The previous day, he'd felt happier. Now his mind was a swirling mess again.

The familiar message tone came from his phone and he picked it up so it was hovering over his face.

'We're all fine, thanks, Macro. Trying to get the ship running again. Things are looking good. We should be at Meta City the day after tomorrow.'

Macro sat up so quickly his computer flew from his paw to the end of the bed. Meta City? So DL wanted the last memory disk? He raked his claws over his face and groaned. No. No, he couldn't let them just walk into Socket's mansion. DL and a human? Didn't Socket want both of them? The more he thought about it, the more Socket's stunt in Botnet City felt like an elaborate scheme.

He kicked himself from his bed and strutted from the room towards the cockpit. His eye immediately went to Matrix who he expected to be up, but his seat was empty. What took him by surprise was the lopunny in his captain's seat. His lip curled into a snarl and he pointed a claw, but she span the seat around and gave him a disarming smile.

"Up already, Captain?" she asked. Then she looked him up and down. "You feeling okay? You look like you lost a wrestling match with a goodra."

"Digit?" he spat. "What are -"

"Good mornin', Cap'n." Anchor slipped into the cockpit beside him and cast him a curious glance. His nose twitched and he recoiled. "Yeech! What, did you take a dive in a swamp?"

Macro flashed a canine. "Bad dream."

"Wow, yeh." Anchor gave him an apologetic nod. "Must've been a bad one because… well… you look bad."

Macro's arms fell limp at his side and he stared at Anchor aghast. He caught a nod from Defrag behind him, along with a smirk.

"You know what…" Macro sighed and rolled his eyes. "Look, we need to get to Meta City. I got word from Switch that they're headin' there in a couple of days, and there ain't no way I'm lettin' DL and Switch practically hand themselves over to her!"

Anchor raised an eyebrow and his mouth formed an 'o'.

"I don't know much about this DL," said Defrag. "No one has really taken the time to fill me in. What does Socket want with her exactly?"

"It's a long story," said Anchor. "I wouldn't get involved if I were you. We'll drop you off on the way." He turned back to Macro. "So we're finally doin' it? Goin' into Socket's nest to grab the final disk? Feels like the plot of some terrible video game."

"Meta City, eh?" Matrix buzzed down the corridor, stifling a yawn. "I'll key us in after breakfast. Nice hairdo, by the way."

Macro shrugged off the ribombee and nodded towards Defrag. "Care to explain?"

"She showed up at the crack o'dawn," Anchor replied. "Wasn't gonna turn her away. Lass ain't got nowhere to stay here."

"Exactly," said Defrag. "If you think I'm letting you lot slip away again after you all flew off to Botnet, you've got another thing coming! I can't steer a ship! How else am I supposed to get back home?"

"You shoulda thought about that before you hitched a ride!" Macro snapped.

Defrag's face fell and she tutted. "Really? You would have left me in Spool City to get cut up by those… things?"

Macro felt his heart sink and he sighed. He shook his head and looked away towards the kitchen. "No. Of course not. We'll… get you back home."

He waved her off and marched towards the bathroom, but a warm sensation spread through his right leg. He froze and looked down at his pouch.

"What the…?"

He reached into it and pulled out a lone Z-Crystal. How had that got in there? He eyed it and held it up to the light. Pale blue, with a dark blue snowflake design beyond it. Icium-Z? His mouth turned dry and he licked his lips as he peered back into the cockpit.

Both Anchor and Defrag had tucked into a bag of donuts. Somehow he didn't think Cookie would be too impressed they were vetoing his pancakes.

"Digit?" Macro rasped.

"Defrag," she corrected. She fixed him with a cold stare and licked sugar from her lips. "What do you want?"

"You know ice punch, right?"

"Sure. Why do you ask?"

Macro's heart felt like lead. He held out the Icium-Z. "I think this might be yours."

Defrag's jaw dropped and Anchor let out a loud 'Eh?!'

The granbull looked up at Macro with a start. "When did you work that out?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," said Macro. "I'm gonna go shower. Prod Matrix until he gets them co-ordinates in for Meta, okay?"

Macro groaned and rubbed at his temples as he strutted towards the wash room. What a morning. First the bad dream, then Defrag receiving a Z-Crystal? Talk about an unexpected ally. Maybe a good,

long shower would help him put things into perspective before they took off on what could be the deadliest mission he'd ever encountered. He shuddered as he thought back at those kartana. Compared to Socket's mansion they felt a lot more welcoming.

…

Light footsteps echoed through the cells, flat feet on cold tile. Surge looked up in time to see Jumper standing before her cell. He flashed a paw at the panel and the glass slid open. A small smile tugged at Surge's lips and she chuckled.

"I take it he's gone?" she asked.

"If you're referring to Macro, yes," said the frogadier. "Now he's out of Cyan City, I have no reason to hold you here."

"Socket will be so pleased."

Jumper met Surge's eyes with an exasperated eye roll. He stood aside and gestured for her to get up and leave.

"What?" she asked as she pushed herself to her feet. "No paperwork?"

"No need. I've made all the notes required for my records."

"Don't wanna cheese of the Mayor even more, eh?" Surge shoved past him into the corridor. "I'll be needing my laser back. And my ship."

"Your ship is in dire need of repairs."

Surge's jaw almost hit the floor and she spun to face him. "I beg your pardon? They wrecked it?!"

"Yes. So if you would like to take one of our ships as compensation-"

"Darn straight I shall! And big enough to carry my own! Then I can sell your golden prize for scraps to fund for a replacement!" She placed her paws on her hips and flashed her canines in a growl. "Allowing Macro's cronies to destroy my… that ship was like home!"

Jumper stared back at her, expressionless. Not even a hint of sympathy in his eyes.

"Look," he said. "The offer is there. The damages to your ship are not my concern or fault. If you want one of Cyan City's ships, take it. But I can't guarantee it will hold your tympole."

Surge groaned and rubbed her paws over her face. Several years. She'd had that ship for several years, and it was reduced to scraps in less than a day.

"What I can guarantee, however," Jumper went on, "is that our ships are a lot faster than your little bubble ball."

She parted her claws to look at him. Something sparked in her mind and she chuckled.

"Oh my," she said. "You're willingly offering me an efficient way to track down Wildcard Gamma?"

Jumper sighed and rolled his eyes as the zigzagoon went on.

"I guess you want him turned in after all." She laughed. "Well, I'm not offering you a single credit after all you've put me through."

Jumper's lips turned into a frown. "I'm not offering you a means to hunt Macro. I'm offering you a quick way out of Cyan City. Macro and his crew have a lot of friends here after what they've done for us, and they're desperate to see you leave. The choice is yours. Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it," said Surge. "Have your cronies load up what's left of my ship into one and I'll be out of here before you can blink."

She made for the exit, but Jumper hopped past her. Keeping his back to her, he opened the door and let her out into the police station.

"Ordinarily, I wouldn't help a criminal pack her bags," he said. "But given I want you out of this city, I don't really have much choice."

She flashed a scowl over her shoulder. "I'm flattered."

"You can do what you want with my ship," he said. "Provided you never, ever come back. I don't want to see your sorry tail in this city again."

Her fur bristled like a brush and a canine poked through her lips. "Oh don't you worry. I have no immediate plans."

…

A/N - Please R&R! =D

Chapter 67

A/N - This chapter was originally a lot shorter, but I've merged two together. It'll certainly speed things up a bit.

Trigger Warning! - Please be aware there is violence later on in this chapter! And not of the Pokemon variety! (As such, Serebii and PokeCommunity will be getting this update later on when I've had permission to post.)

Chapter Sixty Seven

It had been a long night. Switch took down one of the makeshift tents Web had thrown up. Both tents were nothing more than a couple of sheets she'd managed to bundle onto the ship 'just in case', and that night had been one of those nights. The groups had been split into two, cramming themselves into the tents to sleep on the rocky floor. Switch had found himself squeezing his talonflame form in with Web, Poipole, DL and Annie. Not only did Web have a particularly skunky smell to her, Annie stumbled in late, narrowly stepping on his tail feathers, and tossed and turned until the early hours of the morning. He let out a sigh of relief when she finally decided to get up and go for a walk. At least, that's what her mutter had sounded like. Switch had been much too sleepy to chase after her, and had left the girl to go and do her own thing. It wasn't until Trojan recommenced banging away at the ship that Switch finally staggered from the tent in a fog of sleep and hunger.

As he neatly folded the sheet, he took another look around at the camp site. Still no sign of Annie. He'd taken a brief fly and spotted her by the lake, shifting around broken branches and lobbing rocks at the water. But when he'd called she'd merely said she wasn't hungry. So he'd left her. But that had been about an hour ago, and breakfast was long since over.

He looked over at the other two pokemon helping him, working in complete silence. DL had barely said a word since they'd landed on the mountains, lost in thought. Web, respecting the pachirisu's wishes to not be pestered, worked silently alongside her as the pair of them folded the other sheet.

"You know," said Switch, depositing the folded sheet beside the ship's open door, "I'm going to go and see how Annie is."

"Are you sure?" Web asked, a look of concern crossing her face. "I'm pretty worried, and no offence, Switch, but we've known her longer."

"Yes, but we share a species," he said. "At least let me try."

Web glanced to the side and cleared her throat. "From what you've described, it doesn't sound good."

"Then that leaves me with another advantage. I can fly out of the way." The human flashed her a reassuring smile. "If you hear a scream, come running."

Web's jaw went slack. "Come now, don't go making jokes like that!"

Switch laughed and waved a hand. "Don't worry, I've battled bigger and scarier pokemon than Annie."

"Well, if you're going to find her, take her tablets. She'll need them."

Web tossed the jar of blue pills towards Switch and he caught them. He gave her a playful wink which she rolled her eyes at before gathering up the sheets.

Switch found Annie in exactly the same place. She stood beside the lake in her human form, picking up rocks and lobbing them across the water. Each one struck down with a 'plop!' to vanish beneath the shimmering surface.

"If you're not careful, you're going to hurt someone," he said.

"They'll duck." She bounced another rock in her open hand for a moment, as though she was considering what he said, before letting it fly out as far as she could throw it.

Switch stooped beside her, grabbed a flat rock and with a flick of his wrist it skimmed across the water, bouncing a few times before finally disappearing.

"Show off," Annie muttered.

He said nothing, pausing to take in the scene as Annie continued to batter the lake with projectiles. Branches lay in tatters, leaves scattered around amongst the splinters. One poor tree looked like it had received the sorry end of a branch to its trunk. The bark was scuffed and missing altogether in places.

He folded his arms and turned back to Annie. "Needed to burn off some stress, huh?"

She grunted, lifting her arm back to lob a rock as far as it would go.

"What's eating you?" he asked.

"Nothing's eatin' me. I'm not a fish."

"Okay, let me rephrase that. What's bothering you?"

"Nothin' that concerns you."

"No, maybe not." He slumped down onto the floor and skimmed another rock across the lake. "But it helps to talk about these things, rather than letting it hollow you out from the inside. And… potentially give an unfortunate aquatic creature concussion."

"All right, fine." She dropped a large pebble back into the pile and kicked some rubble into the shallows. "You live here, right? Well… not here, here. But in System, right?"

"Yes, I made it my home. Much like you're doing now."

"Well, I was." She slumped down beside him and tugged at some dry grass. "Was much better than back home, if I could even call it that. Barely saw my parents, spent most of my life in isolation because they wanted to 'sort out my head'."

Switch eyed her air quotes before she returned to lobbing small rocks into the pool.

"So your parents left you with a doctor most of your life?" Switch asked.

"Varying doctors. Spent a lot of time on air planes. I was originally from Kalos, but they sent me to Kanto, then to Alola, then back to Kalos, then finally dropped me in Sinnoh where I lived for what… seven years?" She shrugged.

"So you've travelled a lot!"

"I'd hardly call it travelling," she snorted. "I never left the wards except to board another plane. Didn't even see this 'school' thing people talk about. I had a private tutor who made me read alotta books."

"Books are good," said Switch. "I learned a lot from books."

"They weren't really for learnin'," she explained. "They wanted to see what triggered me. Set me off. I can't handle negative emotions, see? So they made me read things that triggered them to see if they could stop me goin' into a rage. If anythin', bein' locked up there set me in a rage. Then I ended up in System and lo and behold! I got locked in another ward because I was scared and bit someone. Smacked 'em with my wing claws - I was originally goin' for a punch but that dang body wouldn't stick. Then I end up here and they fix me. Give me some tablets that lock me in one shape. I meet some folks who care about me and actually want to be my friend. They're not scared! And then I go and find out the one who really seems to care the most, the one I can actually call a friend, is really sick!"

She grabbed a handful of rocks and lobbed them one by one into the water to punctuate her statement.

Switch silently reached into his pocket and handed her the jar of tablets. It took a moment for her to process it, but she snatched up the jar and tossed two of the pills into her mouth.

"I can't understand how you must be feeling," he said, "but I can hazard a guess. That air in the outskirts is awful. Goodness knows what damage it does to the lungs."

She grunted and hugged her knees to her chest.

"You should try talking to him if you're this upset," he said.

"Seriously? What good would that do?" At that moment, her body switched to an archeops.

She let out a roar of profanities and leapt to her feet, swinging a wing around in an arc. Several glowing rocks appeared before her, and she sent them soaring across the lake. They rained down in the centre, creating a huge spray of water, and in the midst of it Switch thought he spotted a very startled horsea.

Switch cleared his throat, watching the water settle into ripples. "I think it would help a lot, actually."

Annie grunted and flopped back onto her bottom. "Well, I'm not entirely sure I want to. He didn't tell me sooner. As far as I'm concerned, this is over. We'll do this rebellion for Zip and the other water dwellers, then I'm headin' out my own way."

"That's really not helpful, Annie."

"If it stops me bein' sad and angry, it's helpful."

"It won't." He leant back on his hands and fixed his golden eyes on her. "You'll have memories of this forever. It'll just… eat you up inside."

"Well, that's where you're wrong." She picked up a rock in her claws and juggled it back and forth. "Because I have this nifty way of just forgettin' things. If I don't like somethin', I won't remember it. Only reason I know I bit that doc is 'cos they told me. I think they call it 'memory repression'. I only remember happy things."

"Then how come you remember all this from yesterday?"

"Because I ain't slept yet."

Switch nodded and took a breath. "Well. I think you need to talk it over. At least explain. It'll give your new friends some understanding." He paused and eyed her for a moment. "You worry them a bit."

"Because they're scared of me?" She gestured a wing at the surrounding wreckage.

"No. Because, like you said, they care about you." He pushed himself to his feet. "I'll let you cool down a bit. See you back at camp."

She didn't even look back at him. As he entered the camp, he glanced back at her still juggling that rock. Then he turned to one of the sturdy trees. Waveform perched in it, huddled into a bundle of feathers. When he noticed Switch watching him, he cracked one eye open.

Switch tucked his hands behind his back and smiled. "Good morning."

The decidueye huffed a noise that sounded like a 'hoo'.

"I'm guessing you didn't sleep either?" Switch sighed.

"I think it was a bad night for most of us," Waveform explained, letting his eye close. "I tend to sleep in bursts anyway."

"Well… it doesn't look like Annie slept a wink."

Waveform fixed one eye on him again.

"She seems pretty upset about something." Switch paused and cleared his throat. "She could probably use a friend."

Waveform sighed and ruffled out his feathers, beating down his chest with his paws. "I think I know what this is about. I have to admit, I'm a little surprised."

"I don't see why. I mean, the lot of you are like a family. Even down to the bickering."

Waveform froze and narrowed his eyes. "How much did she tell you?"

Switch raised a hand and closed his eyes. "I won't say a word, trust me."

The decidueye snorted and kicked off from the branch, flying away from Switch without a sound.

…

Annie barely heard the decidueye approach her. He paused beside her and surveyed their surroundings, silently. Then he brushed some splintered wood aside and sat down beside her, slipping a wing around her shoulders. He took the rock from her claws and replaced it with his paw. Something metal touched her neck and she jolted slightly, then relaxed as she felt him combing her feathers with his beak.

For a while they sat in silence, Annie lost in her thoughts while he preened her feathers.

Finally, she took a long breath then said exactly what was on her mind. "Life isn't fair."

He stopped and lifted his head to look at her. "I wouldn't put it that way. It's hard, but not unfair."

"No, it's not fair. I finally get some freedom and it just leads to yet more pain."

He let out a sigh and trailed his paw over her wing. "I don't know what happened to you, but… life has ups and downs. You need to just learn to handle them."

"What, like you're doing?" she spat.

He stared at her silently, his crimson eyes burning into her skull. She curled her lips back in a snarl and snapped her head around towards him.

"Back in my world, when someone gets sick they get help!" she growled. "Is that not the case here?"

"In the outskirts, if someone gets sick they die," he said. "Pokemon there can't afford fancy help."

"Then that's another thing that needs to be fixed then, ain't it?" She turned back to the lake, but something twigged in her mind and her eyes widened with realisation. "Wait a minute… didn't you pay for like… most of our ship?"

Waveform released her claws and scratched his head. "Yes, but… I have my reasons."

"So you could totally afford to get yourself sorted?"

"No." He released her and tucked his wings to his sides. "It's not as simple as that."

She threw her wings into the air in exasperation. "Then what's the problem? How can you afford to build a ship yet not be able to get yourself treatment?"

"Because I owe Webber and Trojan!" he said. "A lot!"

"What? They bail you outta somethin'?"

"You could say that." He sighed again and ran his paws over his face. "Look… I already told you about that group back in Gear Village. I fled that place, okay? Found myself in the outskirts and got into some scrapes. I wasn't the bounty hunter I am now, I was nothing but a small-time merc picking off stray, weaker pirates and thugs. That gang was more than I could handle. They left me to die on the streets, and Webber took me in. I was surprised. I knew she was a former space pirate, and she'd been on my list. They used up valuable berries to help me recover. I spent many days trying to think up how I could repay them. So I practised, and removed Webber from my list of targets. I went out on the streets picking off wanted criminals until I managed to turn over each and every 'mon in that gang. I gave the credits to Webber and Trojan, much to their protests.

"After that, I left them. But I still wanted to repay them. After a year, I managed to turn in the most wanted space pirate in System. A huge garchomp named Iron Claw who'd shocked terror even into Hunter's heart. I rounded him up along with his crew and net myself three hundred and fifty thousand credits in total. Two hundred thousand of that was for Iron Claw alone."

"Whoa, so you're, like, loaded!" Annie gasped.

He shrugged and tucked his wings back in. "I decided every credit was going to help Webber and Trojan. I went back to Spool City and stayed with them, paid my way. Made out as though I had very little. That each space pirate and criminal I caught counted greatly. I'd give enough to feed us all and pay the rent on that run-down little house. I knew I'd get sick. I hid all evidence under my beak sheath and opted to use silver arrows, given my feathers don't grow back as strong as they used to. It's already set up that when I die, everything goes to them. They can have a new life outside the outskirts and get any help they need."

Annie balled her claws into fists. Her jaw ached from grinding her teeth together. Waveform wasn't even looking at her anymore. Air

whistled from her teeth in a hiss and she grabbed the nearest rock, tossing it into the lake.

"That isn't good enough!" she roared.

He jolted, letting out a surprised hoot.

"I want you all," she said. "All of you. You're like my family now. I didn't really have that back in my own world, and mark my words I ain't losin' one now."

He said nothing as he stared at his talons.

"Besides," she went on, "how would they feel if they knew you were doin' this?"

He sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "I've not really thought about it."

"Then think about it. Because I reckon they'd be as bitter as I am. They might be able to handle it better, but I reckon they'd be steamin'!"

"My decision hasn't changed, Annie."

The feathers down her spine bristled and she clenched her fists so hard the claws punctured her skin. "You're still just gonna let yourself die?"

"I don't have much choice. You're in the mix now. I want what's best for all of-"

"Don't you dare!" she snapped. "You can't decide what's best for me! I don't care about money. I want a family! I never had a family, not one that cares like you do! You guys won't just leave me in some lab to be poked at, made angry or sad and studied like some kinda lab rat! 'Ooh, what's gonna set her off next? What kinda tablets can we give her? Will these ones knock her into a coma again?' No! You guys care! You understand! I don't want to lose any of you!"

She flew to her feet, sending another ancient power out to the lake. This one struck some rocks out on the far side, exploding them into rubble. She stood with her wings outspread, trying to catch her breath.

Waveform had risen to his feet, staring down at her. He pulled her into an embrace, and she buried her nose into his chest feathers.

"Okay," he said. "After all this, we'll sort it out, and we'll move out of the outskirts."

She wound her claws into his chest and let out a strangled sob.

"Is that okay?" he asked.

She nodded and let out a muffled 'uhuh'.

"Shall we get back to the others?" he asked. "I think I can hear the ship's engine."

"No," she choked, still clutching his feathers like a blanket.

"No?" He tried to pull back to look down at her, but she fastened him in some kind of death grip.

"No," she repeated. "I'm really freakin' tired."

…

BackDoor found himself dragged across System Sky as Distortion roared about finding a new host. The android's body still sparked from the cracks in his plating, either from the intensity of the battle or the Ultra Beast's attempts to change his form. Although they'd succeeded, the transformation had put terrible strain on his mechanics.

"Would you slow dow-ow-own?!" his voice still hadn't recovered, stuttering, and crackling with static like a damaged speaker. He was

really beginning to sound like a bad trap record. "I can only go so fast, you know!"

Distortion slowed, turning his eyes onto BackDoor's mechanical mind. 'You complain too much.'

"All right, listen-en." BackDoor tried desperately to calm his voice, to no avail. He leered back at the pair of red eyes. "I can travel through data streams. If you let me, we'll get to wherever it is you're going in a jiff-jiff-jiffy!"

Distortion seemed to mull this over, then let out a hissing sigh. 'Do you have any suggestions for an extra host?'

"Extra host?" BackDoor tried to ignore the fact he'd stalled on the 'a'. "I suppose we could use one of Zero Da-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-"

Distorion slammed BackDoor's brain around in his head, bringing the hoopa to an abrupt stop. The android lifted a paw to rub beneath his left horn and tutted.

"Day," he finished. "Zero Day. And thanks for that."

It had done nothing to fix his damaged speech. He still sounded like a DJ's fall-back mixer station. He drifted forward a couple of feet and lifted a paw, feeling for a data stream. Zero Day weren't too far away. Hopefully he could farm some parts and repair some damage. Then they could open a whole, fun new world and throw Socket into it. See what kind of delights would await her in her 'New System'.

'Who is this Socket?' Distortion asked.

"Oh, juszzzzt the 'mon who had me made," said BackDoor. "Bosses me about like I'm some kind of inferior life form."

'Like those Ultra Beasts?'

"Hey, don't hate on them." BackDoor wagged a paw. "You're one yourself."

'I am far superior to those pathetic creatures! Now find me one of these Zero Day androids.'

"Oh, I can do better than that." The static from the data stream surrounded his body, pulling him in. "I can find us a whole fleet."

With all the ease of water through a straw, BackDoor shot through the data stream. His body became like liquid, curling and curving until the stream locked onto Zero Day's signal. In a flash, they manifested above the fleet. A small fleet. Only six androids drifted back and forth, opening and closing empty portholes.

'These pathetic things are what you expect me to use as a host?' Distortion spat. 'What are they doing?'

"Nothing." BackDoor tucked his paws behind his head and leant back. "Might as well make them do-do-do something useful, eh?"

Distortion sighed and flowed from BackDoor's body, his insectoid form drifting above Zero Day. They turned their heads back and forth, eyes contracting into pinpricks. One of the closer ones span its head around as its nose lit up like a laser gun. Then it unleashed its tri-attack beam. Distortion vanished momentarily, letting it pass harmlessly through the air. Then he reappeared behind the porygon-z. It let out a panicked binary stream, rallying its allies. Each one aimed its own attack, but Distortion vanished into the android, letting it take the brunt of the friendly fire. It sparked and spasmed in the air, its legs flailing, then dropped slowly towards System Ground in a feeble retreat.

Distortion manifested beside BackDoor and tutted.

"These things are about as sturdy as cardboard armour," said Distortion. "But if you want to repair your own feeble body, go ahead. For now… you'll just have to do."

BackDoor rolled his eyes, muttering silently. He advanced towards the fleet, removed one of his rings, and commenced pulling each

one apart to farm their mechanical organs.

…

Not far above System Ground, the wounded porygon-z drifted through the sky. Sparks danced around its joints, rendering its movements even more erratic. It turned its head back and forth, spraying binary in a desperate bid to find its allies.

Repairs. It needed repairs.

A gentle hum resounded above it, and it craned its head back to see a golden ship. A threat. Sparks erupted from its laser, cutting off any attempts to launch an attack. A long, narrow beam shot from the ship's nose and locked onto its body, dragging it towards a wide opening.

'We've found one, Yobi,' a voice called through its wireless signal. 'I've no idea what's happened to it, but we're bringing it back.'

…

The journey seemed to be taking forever. Macro wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or not. His eye kept going to his computer, checking for any new updates from Switch. The latest one he'd received had been the early hours of the morning, while he'd been tossing and turning in a desperate bid to sleep.

'The engine is repaired. We're now on our way to Meta City.'

Those two sentences had twisted Macro's insides like one of Cookie's pastry bags. Macro leant one arm over the edge of his bed, reaching for his trash can. Oh, he felt wretched, but nothing was coming up. He hadn't eaten since they'd decided to make the journey. The thoughts of Meta City, of facing Socket in her mansion, of being in a hot-bed of pokemon after his head… he could barely stand it. It was like a bad dream he'd never wake up from.

He craned his head back to look at his window. A faint light seeped through it. Early morning sunlight. If his memory served, that meant they were very close. Too close. His insides did a somersault and he keeled towards his bucket, dry heaving against an empty stomach devoid even of water.

"Cap'n?" A soft knock against his door was followed closely by Anchor's worried face. "You okay?"

"Do I sound okay?" Macro croaked, rolling onto his back.

Anchor studied him silently, and ran a paw over his mohawk. "We don't have to do this. We can get the rest of the 'mon meant to help us, increase our numbers."

"They're meant to help us stop BackDoor, not retrieve DL's memory disks."

"All right." Anchor clasped his paws behind his back and glanced over his shoulder at the hallway. "Then I guess we're goin' in guns blazin'? Shall I make sure we're all armed to the teeth?"

Macro pushed himself up and narrowed his eyes at him. "You're makin' it sound like we're nearly there."

"We're approximately one hour away, Cap'n."

Macro's gut felt like lead. Fur pricked along his spine and he wound his claws into his bed sheet.

"If we're doin' this alone," said Anchor slowly, "we need to be prepared."

"We're not alone. We've got this other human and her crew, right?"

"That's still…" Anchor counted off on his claws. "Twelve of us… Eleven if we don't count Cookie."

"Okay." Macro kicked his legs off the bed and licked his dry lips. "Make sure we take enough guns. We're all gonna need to be armed."

…

"I've got the guns!" Annie poked her avian head out from the cargo hatch and hoisted a bag onto the floor. "Man, I can't believe I forgot we got these."

She scrambled out of the hatch and crawled through the bag, dragging out its contents.

"Careful!" Trojan barked as a laser skittered across the floor and bounced against his foot.

"Sorry," quipped Annie. "That one's yours."

DL leant over her shoulder, watching as the archeops handed out the lasers. She craned her head around to face the pachirisu and cocked an eyebrow.

"You need one?" she asked.

DL shook her head and pawed at her own laser. "I'm already armed."

"Good. 'Cos I've got a spare, and there's only two of you newbies." Annie looked up at Poipole poking his head from Web's tail. "Well… three… but I'm gonna guess you don't need a gun?"

Poipole shook his head and pointed to his proboscis. "I've got one built in."

"Then that just leaves you." Annie tossed a laser towards Switch who flailed his arms to catch it.

"I said be careful!" Trojan roared. "I don't want a hole punched through this ship! I've only just finished fixin' the jackin' thing!"

Switch let out a sigh of relief and popped the small laser into his trouser pocket. It definitely wasn't designed for a human's use. Maybe he could manage it with his talons?

Annie popped her laser into her belt's holster and tapped it. "There we go. Let's see that Mayor answer to this!"

"Speaking of which," said Switch, "I think it would be best if we didn't just show up guns blazing."

Annie frowned. "I don't understand. What?"

"DL wants to get her final memory disk," Switch explained. "We need time to find it. So if you drop us off first, we can sneak in, while the rest of you find another way in to… bring about your rebellion."

Annie chuckled and flashed a toothy grin. "What better way than to bring down her flyin' mansion, eh?"

"I wouldn't say so." Waveform cracked an eye open. "If you bring it down… you'll kill any pokemon below it."

"He's right," said Zip. "Right now, the ocean is below it. You could kill hundreds of water dwellers."

"Then what do you suggest, little fish?" Annie asked.

"I dunno," said Zip. "Maybe we could take control of it?"

Annie scratched her chin with a claw.

"I don't like any of this," said Web. "But I'm with Waveform and Zip on this one. If we're going to do anything, we're taking over the mansion."

"Yeah! Takeover!" Annie threw her arms in the air. "Viva la rebellion!"

Zip let out a loud 'woo!' and did a somersault in his bowl.

DL gave a weak smile and pushed herself to her feet. She turned to look out of the window at the floating mansion mere minutes away.

"I can't believe I'm going back there," she said. "I never thought I'd step paw in that place again."

Switch looked down at her. "You sure you want this disk?"

She nodded and made a 'mhm.'

"Well then…" He smiled and winked. "Let's snag it and leave before anyone notices."

"We've got ya back on that one." Annie knocked the safety off her laser.

"For goodness' sake!" Trojan barked. "Stop messin' with them guns!" He turned to Web and gave her a pleading look. "Webber…"

The skuntank leant over her chair and prised the laser from Annie's claws, much to the archeops' protests. She tucked it away in her belt pouch and waggled a claw at Annie.

"You can have it back when we're off the ship," she said.

Annie tutted and fell to her bottom, folding her wings. "Ruin all my fun."

DL crept closer to the windscreen and peered out at the city. They were drifting over the ocean towards the mansion, having skirted the city to stay masked in the smog. But the air cleared enough for them to see the coast. Below them, hundreds of lithe, spider-like creatures scrambled over buildings and what was left of the mechanical trees. Their bodies pulsed with electricity, discharging periodically. Not a single pokemon filled the streets. Her memory of Meta City was of a place bustling with life. Now, it looked like it had been hit with an apocalypse.

She swallowed a lump in her throat and winced away from the scene, fixing her eyes on the mansion. Her anxiety washed away with a burning anger, and she dug her claws into the back of Trojan's seat.

"I might be of more use if I could use my electrical attacks," she said. "Then I could use that Z-Move. But no… she had to do this to me."

She pawed at the jack socket on the back of her head. All eyes were drawn to her, but no one said a thing.

Except Annie. "Use your what-now?"

DL was silent, eyes fixed on the flying mansion. The ship crept closer, the mansion growing clearer through its glass dome. The pyukumyuku fell parallel to it, following the circumference.

"There's gotta be a docking bay somewhere," Trojan muttered.

"We could probably fly from here," said Switch. "We'd be a lot harder to spot, unlike your ship."

The scrafty waved a paw. "Be my guest. You've got our number, let us know when you're inside."

Switch pushed the button on his watch and shrank down into his talonflame form. He flashed DL a smile and lowered his head.

"Climb on," he said. "And hold tight."

The pachirisu obliged, clasping her fists over the feathers on his neck. They looked back at the crew, meeting both concerned and excited faces.

"You two take care," said Web. "If you run into any trouble-"

"We'll call you." Switch raised a wing in a salute. "See you on the inside!"

As he jumped from the ship, Annie's voice rang out behind them, "Viva la rebellion!" Then it was drowned out by the wind rushing past their ears.

Propellers span their deadly blades beneath the mansion, keeping the building airborne. Toxic air formed a cloud beneath it that was constantly repelled by the propellers. But that wasn't their main purpose. They were designed to keep things cool. The engine the building was using was one Switch was oddly familiar with. Entire continents held up with primitive technology. An exhaust spat deadly fumes to join the cloud, allowing the mansion to be moved, albeit slowly, across System's sky.

"We just need to find a way in," he called to DL. "Can you see anything?"

DL craned her neck around to examine the mansion's base. Switch swept back and forth, keeping his eyes on the propellers while trying to elevate them above the toxic cloud. Anything. A cargo bay for ships, a gap between the engine into its room, a window into the basement… But he was coming up short.

He dipped his wings, resigning himself to have to go up the side of the mansion to find a window, and risk being caught, when DL pointed a claw.

"There," she said. "Right beside that propeller."

He followed her paw to something he'd previously missed. A door beneath the mansion, between the rear propeller and the exhaust. An emergency hatch.

"If you aim an attack at it," she explained, "it might bust it open."

"It seems a little risky," he said.

"This whole expedition is risky," she said. "We might as well go in from the back exit."

Switch nodded and arced up towards the hatch. He gradually picked up speed until the air whooshed around their ears. His talons lit up with energy and he brought them up above his head, lashing at the door. A combination of metal and plastic. Cracks exploded across it with the impact. A second aerial ace ruptured the door, and it fell free towards the ocean below. Switch tucked his wings in and flipped into the hatch. The smell of oil assaulted his senses, and he brought up his right wing to waft his beak. DL coughed a few times then slipped from his back.

"Any idea where we are?" he choked.

She shook her head, turning to take in their surroundings.

The ancient engine took up most of the room. The hatch had been at the back, embedded into the floor. All access to it was via narrow corridors that circumnavigated the engine. The monolithic contraption was fenced off, its only access a gate, locked and in need of a key. It roared, drowning out the spinning propellers beneath it.

DL waved a paw towards a door at the other end and led Switch towards it. She reached up and jiggled the handle. Locked. Switch nudged her aside and rammed a claw into the handle, splintering it from the wood. The door swung freely towards them, and they paused to look out into a dark hallway.

No… it wasn't a hallway.

DL's fur stood on end as dim light lit up a room from an old computer monitor. Swirls danced around the screen, indicating no one had touched it for a while, but each change of colour reflected off metallic utensils, glinting off sharp blades and screwdrivers. In the corner were the glistening chrome parts of an incomplete android.

DL swallowed audibly and reached up to clutch at Switch's feathers. "I know where we are…"

…

Macro stood by the cockpit door, checking over his lasers. Ground, grass and water. His usual choices. He had a vague idea of what cronies Socket might have working for her. Primarily psychic and normal types, but a fair few of her soldiers could fly. He toyed with the idea of adding the electric component he'd taken from DL's laser. One extra choice to scroll through. One extra choice added to his response times. His eye wandered to Anchor's gauntlets, sparking as the granbull slammed them together 'just to check they were workin''. Macro released the electric core into his pouch and settled with the three he already had.

His sucker punch could handle Socket and her psychic types, while brute force was the way to go with any normal type soldiers. Anchor had that by the bucket, and with his electric gauntlets, any flying types would be reduced to a spasming heap. Defrag stood behind the granbull, checking over her own weapons. She'd been oddly quiet. But after everything they'd told her, her mind was made up to help them assist DL. She'd not quite decided on the situation with the Ultra Beasts, returning the ice type Z-Crystal Macro had handed to her.

Then there was Matrix.

"Think I need a bigger gun?" Matrix asked.

Macro looked up at the ribombee fluttering above the navigation screen. His tiny paws checked over his belt. Weapons made for bugs. Tiny yet deadly.

"I think you're fine," said Macro.

Truth be told, he'd rarely seen Matrix in combat. But he needed the numbers. He glanced up at Cookie as he shuffled into the cockpit, returning Macro's glance with one wracked with nerves. He wound his paws together, looking over the ship's controls.

"You sure you've got this?" Macro asked. "Because I can always ask Matrix to stay behind."

"Sure, leave the tiny bug." Matrix's sarcasm didn't fall on deaf ears.

"No, I'm fine," Cookie squeaked. "Anchor and Matrix have shown me everything. I think I can-"

"Oh, look who's come back." Matrix lowered himself towards the screen. "Our stalker."

Macro rolled his eyes and let out a long groan. "That's gotta be Surge."

"Surge?" Anchor looked up from his gauntlets. "I thought she were apprehended in Cyan?"

"Guess Jumper let her go." Macro sighed and rubbed beneath his horn. "Well, this mission just got harder."

"You've met Surge then?" Defrag asked. "She's one of System's best bounty hunters. She used to work for my boss."

Macro narrowed his eyes at her. "And she's been hunting me. Thanks a lot, Digit."

"Defrag," the lopunny corrected. "Besides, Surge hasn't worked for us in like a week. She told me Socket hired her to turn you in, but she's since been fired. So… I'm gonna hazard a guess she's no threat."

"Really?" Macro rounded on her. "'Cos she ain't actin' like it! I wouldn't be surprised if Socket withdrew her bounty after her previous little stunt."

The cockpit fell silent and Matrix looked at each one in turn.

He let out a sigh and buzzed over their heads. "I'm gonna get a bigger gun."

Defrag stuttered for a moment, then looked away and brushed back her ears. "What did she do?"

"Let's just say she's the reason DL ain't on my ship." Macro waved a laser towards the door. "Come on, let's get this over with. Cookie, find us an entrance."

The slurpuff nodded and hopped into Matrix's chair. Despite his small stature, he almost dwarfed the ribombee's seat. Macro left him to it, moving out towards the exit hatch. His crew and Defrag crowded into it, letting the internal door shut behind them.

The mansion was uncomfortably close. Macro could see it below them through the open hatch, but to Socket and her cronies, Wildcard Gamma was invisible. The cloak blended the hulking ship seamlessly against the sky. A mixture of blue and white clouded with yellow smog. Just beyond them stood a docking port, riddled with her golden fleet. Originally part of a small 'airport' behind her mansion, where her workers could come and go. Now it resembled those attached to the floating cities, only on a much smaller and less grand scale.

Defrag lifted a pair of binoculars to her eyes and frowned at the port. "It seems empty."

"That's no surprise," said Macro. "Few pokemon are gonna wanna stand outside in this smog, even with filter masks."

"Not to mention it's colder up here." Matrix buzzed his wings in protest. "Permission to borrow your scarf, Captain?"

"Buzz off," said Macro. "You've got your own."

"Psh, it's part of my body but whatever."

"The docks are empty," came Cookie's voice. "Prepare yourselves to drop in!"

The neon ladder began to descend. Macro took hold of it, followed by the rest of his crew. As each rung flashed into place, the mansion's docks grew closer. Each flash caused dread to rise in Macro's gut. Each flash brought back that terrible nausea, and he resisted the urge to throw a paw over his mouth.

When his feet touched solid ground, everything began to spin. He placed a paw on his head and tried to shake it off.

"Having second thoughts?" Defrag asked.

Macro frowned at her, but he felt too overwhelmed to retort. Anchor dropped a paw on his shoulder, drawing his attention.

"We can always turn back now," he said. "But once we're in there…"

"We can't turn back now." Matrix twirled a pistol around one of his claws. "I'm in the zone."

"This isn't a game," Defrag scolded. "Pull yourself into reality, bee."

Macro looked up at the iron doors, scouring the area above it. The walls. The guttering.

"See any cameras?" he asked.

"Nope," said Anchor.

"Neither do I." Macro licked his lips. "That's not reassuring."

Matrix rose higher into the air and fluttered about above the door. "Unless they're those keyhole-like ones, I'm gonna guess they don't have any."

"And what are the odds of that?" Macro asked.

"About one in… none."

Macro's heart sank and he glanced back up where his ship was hiding. Or he hoped it was still hiding.

"I'll scope out the area," said Anchor. "Stick close and don't go past me."

"Good idea." Macro took a deep breath to steady his nerves and grabbed his right laser. "We've no idea what's beyond those doors."

"Whatever it is, bring it on." Matrix knocked the safety off his weapon.

Defrag rolled her eyes and drew her own gun. "Oh whatever. It serves to be prepared."

Anchor pulled his heat sensor out of his pouch and placed it over his eye, then he moved on ahead of Macro. He kept close to the wall, ushering the small group after him. Then he paused beside the door and cocked his ear.

The air around them trembled and each one of them looked back at the docks. Appearing with the force of a golden bullet was one of Socket's ships. The sleek, pointed design looked every bit as threatening as its hidden pilot promised. The door to the ship hissed open, but before its pilot could exit, a stream of bubble bombs rushed out from the clouds, striking the golden ship with a series of explosive blasts.

The pilot yelped and leapt from the ship, landing in a heap of scraggy brown and white fur. She rolled backwards, aiming her laser in the direction of Wildcard Gamma. But it was a feeble attack that only managed to detonate one lone bubble.

Surge dragged herself to her feet and aimed her laser at Macro. "Really? You let your crew steal my ship… and wreck it?!"

Macro raised a paw, keeping his own laser trained on Surge. "I didn't have anythin' to do with that. Besides… your ship, my life? Kinda a

bit imbalanced there, aren't we?"

"Well…" Surge's frown distorted into a sneer. "Now we're here, I think all your bounties rolled into one will fund me a new ship and then some. What do you say?"

Macro opened his mouth to retort, but a strange sucking noise drew their attention behind them. The door exploded inward off its hinges, dragging everyone into the building with all the force of a vacuum. Surge held onto the door frame, but Macro found himself buried beneath his crew. Anchor pushed himself up, letting his captain shake off the fog and try to process what had happened. When he opened his eyes, his heart froze in his chest.

Socket stared back at him, standing over them with her paws on her hips. Around her stood a small army. Pidgeot, a couple of medicham and meowstic, a slowbro, an oranguru, ambipom and ursaring. Each one was kitted out with some kind of modification or weapon. But Macro's eyes went immediately to Socket's smirk.

"So you thought we didn't have any cameras?" A chuckle. "You were wrong." She snapped her claws, not looking back at her army. "There's a talonflame hanging around in Yobi's lab with my Download Database. Apprehend the both of them."

The ursaring nudged one of the meowstic and the pair rushed from the room, dodging the rubble.

"Now don't get any ideas," Socket went on. "One bad move and your little captain is going to be reduced to minced meat. 'Mon, relieve Wildcard Gamma of their weapons."

The army moved in, taking the weapons from each of the space pirates and Defrag. Each crew member was picked up and pulled aside, held with a weapon to their heads. Socket continued to smirk down at Macro, freezing him to the spot.

"Okay, do what you want to me," he spat. "But don't you dare hurt DL."

"Oh, don't worry. I won't hurt her." Socket shrugged a shoulder. "I'm merely going to repair all the damage you've done. You see… how convenient is it that you come tumbling through my door right as I'm trying to get my plan into action? Not only do you deliver yourselves, you also bring back my computer!"

"DL isn't a computer!"

"Oh, but you're wrong," said Socket. "The brain is a biological computer. I was just making it more efficient."

Macro clenched his teeth together so hard it hurt. Every word that came out of the gothitelle's mouth made his skin crawl. He jerked his head around, bringing his horn up in an arc. It struck the gothitelle on the jaw, sending her staggering away from him. Her army leapt to action, but stopped just as suddenly as a purple light engulfed them. Socket stood with her arms spread, her eyes glowing with an eerie light.

"Back off," she warned her army. "He's mine."

One of the iron bars forming the door frame shook until it broke free, flying towards her outstretched paw. She released her army and took a step towards Macro.

"Isn't it funny," she said. "All space pirates use aquatic themed ships to fly through System Sky. What was originally a stand against the introduction of meat has become nothing short of irony. Most of them eat fish. I know you don't, I saw enough of your pathetic protests in your younger years before you became Wildcard. How many ships have you had? Three?" She shrugged, slapping the iron beam into her paw. "A schooling wishiwashi. Fitting, given all the hassle you and your crew have caused me. A schooling wishiwashi is a force to be reckoned with, but get one on its own and it's nothing more than an appetiser!"

The iron beam sliced through the air and struck Macro in the jaw. He flew onto his side with a grunt as pain exploded through his face and horn. He was pretty sure he'd heard a crack. Something warm and wet trickled from his horn onto his fur, and he instinctively reached up to check it. Blood coated his pink pads. Socket let out a sigh and let the beam fall to her side.

"You know…" she said. "That felt good. I think I might understand why you scum use weapons."

She advanced towards him, bringing the iron beam up for another swing. Then another. Each one cut through the air like a whip. Macro tried to lift his paws to block it, but it was useless. His head, arms, ribs, legs… everything fell victim to Socket's 'weapon'.

"Stop it!" shouted Anchor. "Stop it! You're going to kill him!"

Sounds of commotion erupted behind her as the guards fought to restrain the granbull.

"That's murder, you hypocrite!" Anchor roared.

Socket didn't listen. Instead, she laughed. Laughing at Macro's feeble yelps. He had to get away. Just crawl for the door. He cracked an eye open to see her grinning, maniacal face before the iron bar struck his head once more. Whether or not it was the final blow, he didn't find out. His body gave into the pain, shutting him into blackness.

…

A/N - Well, there's your scary gothitelle. It was never gonna be an easy raid. Please R&R!

Chapter 68

A/N - Sorry for the tiny delay. Busy weekend! Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D This story is almost completed now. I finished writing chapter 79 today. It looks like it will be finished at 80 chapters!

Chapter Sixty Eight

What Switch had perceived as an incomplete android had them pinned in a corner. The gigantic chrome bug's pincers flexed by his throat, sparking with electricity. The creation's crude design was a vague attempt at what might happen should a vikavolt be fused with a hacksaw.

"Pretty good at warding off pests, isn't it?" The voice came from a sparksurfer raichu, leaning against the far wall.

The chubby pokemon waved a paw at the other guards and they flooded outside. Not one of them had wanted to advance on Switch and DL. More frightened of the android than anything else in the room. Switch didn't want to blindly guess what the thing could do, but if it were like the weapons space pirates used, it wouldn't be wrong to guess it could utilise both electric and bug type attacks… and with more force than a boosted hyper beam. The psychic types and pidgeot that had left the room likely had the same fears.

"Now." Yobi clapped his paws together, but his expression remained unreadable. "What to do with you first? I'm guessing I need to repair Download Database but… I'm more excited about that human you're hanging around with."

A deep hum came from the vikavolt as its mandibles whirred like a chainsaw, generating higher volts of electricity. DL flinched back from it until her spine pressed up against the wall.

"What makes you think he's human?" Her voice didn't even waver. She locked her eyes on the raichu, demanding a response.

He shrugged and looked down at the computer in his paw. "Oh, I don't know. The readings I've got from scanning him show a combination of both human and pokemon DNA, and not the kind that comes from years and years of cross breeding. Believe me, I should know, given I've often scanned myself. This is more pure." He looked back up at Switch and chuckled. "Can you fathom my excitement after finally finding a human? Now I get to find out what it is that made my ancestors tick."

"You're not touching him," said DL. "I won't let you."

Yobi fixed her with a leer. "Why? What are you going to do?"

"Leave it, DL," Switch whispered. "You're going to get out of here. I'll deal with the mad scientist."

Yobi laughed and shook his head. "What? Do you think I can't hear you? Hello!" He waved at his ears. "You don't stand a chance, Loop. I've waited years for an opportunity like this. I was stoked when Socket agreed to my plan to scour for new worlds. My main goal was finding a little human for my own intentions. I mean… it's estimated about eighty percent of System's inhabitants have some level of human DNA. Although a small percentage of us are a bit more obsessed and strive to keep our humanness higher. Oh, how they'd love to hear about what you have to say. Shame they won't get that chance."

"What are you talking about?" Switch gasped. "If they want to ask me things, then they can! I'll talk!"

"I didn't mean it like that. I don't have time for talk. I'm less interested in your words, human. I want to know what makes you tick, and I doubt you'll be answering any questions from my dissecting table."

DL's fur bristled and she balled her paws into fists, silently glaring at the raichu.

He sighed as he put his computer back into his pouch. "But first… I have a promise to keep for Socket."

That was it. DL let out a scream and threw herself towards the raichu, her cheeks sparking. Electricity flooded towards her jack socket, but she shook off the pain, tackling Yobi to the floor. He struck the ground with an 'oof!' then his eyes snapped open to fix on hers. They lit up with an eerie purple light, trapping DL's flailing limbs.

"You fool!" he screeched. "You really think you can do anything to me?!"

Switch zipped towards her like a dart, flexing his sharp talons. Before he could reach Yobi, electricity shot through his body, and the sharp mandibles of the vikavolt clamped around his tail. His beak flew open in a screech and he struck the floor, his limbs jerking with electricity. He rapidly lost control of his form, switching from human to talonflame like a strobing light.

Yobi laughed and pushed the detained pachirisu from his body. "It's useless. You won't get away from us this time."

He waved a paw towards Switch, his form completely out of control. His watch was fried. Limbs flickered between wing and talon, his body no longer settling on one shape.

"Socket will get her wish with a new Download Database," said Yobi. "I might even turn you back into one, Loop."

DL let out a squeak of protest, struggling against her psychic restraints.

"But first," Yobi said slowly as he nodded towards Switch, "I think I'll make you watch. It really is quite fascinating."

…

Everything hurt. Pain cut into Macro's dream, dragging him into a painful reality. Cold, hard floor. Fur sticky with blood. His horn pulsed all the way into the base of his skull.

Something cold and wet brushed over his jaw and he snapped his eyes open, lifting an aching arm to grab at it. Water soaked through his pads, scented with sitrus and oran berries. He tried to blink away the bleariness, but his eyes wouldn't focus. Someone crouched over him, her ears twitching as she stared back at him.

"DL?" his voice came out as a husky croak.

"I'm afraid not." Surge tried to hide any disappointment, but her voice sounded thick with tears. "Oh Macro, what did she do to you?"

It wasn't a question he needed to answer. She brushed the wet rag over his eyes, and everything began to come into focus. Surge sat over him beside a bowl of pink water. He didn't want to know if the water was tinted with blood or berries. The latter was a more reassuring thought. She brushed the rag over his cheek, soothing some of the throbbing in his jaw.

"Where is everyone?" he asked.

"I don't know." She strained the rag into the water, and Macro realised it wasn't just a rag but her bandanna. The formerly green tartan fabric had been reduced to a blood-stained mess. "When she dragged us all into the cargo room, I held onto the door and ran the first chance I got. I hid on my ship, but… when I heard screaming I couldn't leave."

"Noble," Macro spat.

"Hey, if I'd been in there with you, you'd have no one to help you," she scoffed.

"There's no use in helping me anyway." He lifted a paw to his face and choked back a sob. "It's over. She's won."

"Don't be ridiculous. Pokemon need you right now."

"Neither of us even know where anyone is," he groaned. "We don't even know if they're alive."

She removed his paw from his face and brushed her bandanna over his forearm, removing the congealed blood.

"What if she's taken DL's memories back?" His voice came out weak and tears pricked his eyes.

"Once you're back on your feet," she said, "we'll find them. All of them. They're probably held up in their own cells. My priorities kind of changed when I saw you like this."

"And how do you expect to find them?" he snorted. "There's cameras everywhere. She's a psychic type, she'll know we're coming."

"Only if we're close enough to her. Besides, I didn't sneak in here out of sheer luck."

He cracked an eye back open and looked past her. Iron bars rose up behind her, but the gate was wide open. Some kind of primitive holding cell. If he were to hazard a guess, they were still in the belly of the mansion.

"How many of these cells are there?" he asked.

"Two. And going off the amount of dust and rust, I doubt they've been used in centuries." She soaked the rag with fresh water. "I'll get the schematics up later. Just… let's focus on getting you fixed up first."

He wasn't arguing with that. He felt awful. Every inch of his body ached. He tried to roll onto his back to give his ribs a rest, but his right leg complained with the effort. He let his paw fall over his eyes

and took a deep breath, but it came out as a cough as a stab shot through his lungs.

"I'm pretty convinced she's broke something," he said.

"She's broken a lot of somethings," Surge muttered. "What did she hit you with?"

"An iron bar." He paused to cough and rub his chest. "Repeatedly."

"I'm really beginning to question her sanity."

She rung out her bandana again, then reached over and removed Macro's paw from his eyes. He looked back at her, trying to read her expression. A mixture of worry and sadness. Her eyes damp and her cheeks wet with tears. After a moment he realised she was still clutching his paw. He slipped it from her claws to idly scratch his scar.

"I feel like this is my fault," she said.

"It's not. We'd have had to come back here for DL's final memories anyway. It was never going to be easy."

"I want you to know," she diverted her gaze to the wall, "that I'm really sorry. I've acted like a real, jealous… Oh, I can't think of the right word."

He watched her as she puzzled over it, drawing her eyes back to him. "I warned you that you were playing a dangerous game."

"I know." She reached for the rag and brushed it over his ribs, causing him to flinch. "And you were really good at it."

"They were just words," he said. "You asked for payment and I gave it. But if I'd known for a moment it would have messed with your head, I would have declined."

"Would you?"

He stared at her, aghast, but she didn't meet his eye. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You needed my hacking services. You'd probably have leapt through a flaming hoop if I'd asked for it as payment."

"I have you know my mother raised a gentlemon."

"One who became a space pirate."

"Yeh, well…" He rubbed a paw over his face, feeling the swelling in his jaw. "Most pirates in Pulse City know I don't generally form attachments."

Surge was quiet for a moment as she wrung out her bandanna. She glanced over at him and gave him a wry smile.

"I'm wondering," she said. "If you hadn't met DL, would you have ever meant the things you said?"

He stared at her wordlessly, his mouth hanging open. She shook her head sharply and turned back to the water bowl.

"Actually, don't answer that," she said. "I don't think I'd like either answer."

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry I ever went along with that deal," he said. "I should have realised feelings were involved the second you asked me. In fact, I think on some level I did. It was a pretty jerk move on my part."

"Well, you were good company." She turned back to him and brushed the rag over his swollen cheek. "Now let's get you fixed up so we can go and rescue DL and your crew."

"You're actually going to help me?"

"Sure. Let's say it's making up for all those times I tried to kill you."

"All right, deal." He closed his eyes and groaned. "Right now I could use all the help I can get, anyway."

…

Matrix worked over the dismantled lock panel, his tiny paws blurring with each combination. Anchor and Defrag stood aside, watching the ribombee in a mash of fascination and impatience.

"I can't believe she'd just lock us in a room," said Defrag. "What game is she playing?"

"Cat and mouse," said Anchor. "She's toying with us. Keepin' us around so she can do what she pleases right before she bails on this world."

The lopunny shuddered and hugged herself. "I'd rather she just toss us over into the ocean right now."

"Exactly. Keep us scared. You saw what she did to Macro. She'll probably do somethin' similar to us."

"I'd like to see her try," said Matrix. "I don't know about you two, but at least one of us in this room has a type advantage."

"Yeah," said Defrag. "Way to put that to work earlier, by the way."

"I don't appreciate the sarcasm," Matrix scoffed. "Besides, I'd like to see you throw an attack while some bird of prey has you in its beak."

"He has a point," said Anchor. "That pidgeot would have bitten him in half before he'd even finished buzzing his bug buzz."

Matrix tutted and flapped his wings a little faster, creating an audible drone. "It'll take days to wash the bird breath out."

The room fell into silence again, and the two larger pokemon glanced around at their surroundings. The room was oddly clean, given it probably hadn't been used in quite some time. A bed stood

against one wall, immaculately made as if its guest was expected at any moment. A small writing desk perched beneath the window. A wardrobe, locked with a traditional keyhole. A set of drawers, also locked. It all looked so out of place inside a modern building that relied on card keys.

"Do you think he's alive?" Defrag's voice was unusually quiet.

Anchor looked back at her, his mouth opening but he couldn't think of an answer. He scratched his mohawk and sighed, turning back to Matrix. If the ribombee had heard her, he didn't answer either. All his attention remained focused on the task at hand. He'd removed the buttons one by one and was attempting to hot-wire it.

"I…" Anchor cleared his throat. "I honestly can't answer that."

Defrag took in a trembling breath and diverted her eyes to the wardrobe. She hugged her arms tight around her torso.

"She's a monster," she said. "I think on some level I've always known it, but after today? How can I go back to working for Tracer knowing the pokemon I'm really working for does stuff like this?"

"Easy answer," said Anchor. "You don't. You're always welcome back on Wildcard Gamma."

She spat a laugh. "You really think Macro wants me back?"

No sooner had the words left her mouth her expression fell and she leant back into the writing desk. Anchor joined her and placed a paw on her shoulder.

"Look, we don't know for certain," he said. "But I can assure you, we're not leavin' this place until we know. And if I can, I'm takin' him home regardless."

"You guys all really care about each other, don't you?"

"Yeah, of course we do."

Electricity danced from the panel, then let out a loud 'pop!'. Matrix yelped and flew back across the room to land in a crumpled, smoking heap at Defrag's feet. He sat back up and rubbed his antennae.

"You all right, Matrix?" Anchor asked.

"Yeah, just a little singed." He fluttered back into the air and smoothed down his fur. "I shorted the panel. We can leave."

Defrag rolled her eyes and made for the door. "I don't know why you didn't do that first."

"Erm… Hello?" Matrix spread his arms, showing the singed edges to his yellow fur.

"It'll wash." Defrag opened the door and froze.

A medicham turned around, reflecting the surprise on her face. Before he could lift an arm to attack, Anchor socked the fighting type in the face with a punch. He flew to the side, spittle flying from his lips, and landed in a slump on the floor.

Anchor shook out his fist and gave Defrag a sideways glance. "Bit of a dirty move, that. I can't use elemental punches without my gauntlets."

"Well, it worked." Defrag tiptoed over the medicham's motionless body. "Come on, let's go. Before more of these goons show up."

Anchor and Matrix followed after her, trotting along the corridor as silently as they could.

"Where do you think they're keeping Macro?" Defrag asked as they turned a corner.

"No clue." Matrix brought up the schematics on his computer. "Unfortunately this place is riddled with cameras, so I'd brace ourselves for-"

"Stop them!" The harsh, masculine voice caused the group to falter.

A male meowstic and a slowbro stood before them, the latter charging psychic energy in his ears. His eyes flashed and a torrent of purple light flew straight at Anchor. The granbull ducked as Matrix countered the psychic with a bug buzz. His wings flapped wildly, sending the two psychic types careening backwards.

"Typical brains and brawn duo," the ribombee spat. "Anchor, you take care of that doofus."

He pointed a tiny claw at the slowbro, who immediately rounded on Anchor. The granbull didn't hesitate. He flew at the slowbro, jaws wide open to deliver a crunch. But the otter pokemon took a step back and fired a water pulse past his ears. It struck Matrix before he could launch another attack, plastering him against the immaculate wall.

"I don't like being called a doofus!" she barked.

Anchor froze and snapped his jaws shut, taking a step back. His hesitation cost him as the meowstic's psychic blew him back down the corridor. Defrag tutted and threw a heavy punch towards the slowbro. She teetered backwards, her eyes spinning, until she tripped over her tail and fell onto her back in a daze.

The meowstic flexed his claws and rushed at Defrag. She leapt into the air with a twist and landed a kick right in his face. Spittle and blood flew into the air as he fell away from her. He wiped a paw across his nose but before he could gather himself, another kick struck him across the ears. His paws flew to the side of his head to nurse the pain, and he fixed livid eyes on the lopunny.

"Yeah, I know where your weak points are!" She stooped to peel a soggy ribombee off the floor and then bellowed to Anchor. "Get a move on, you soft heart!"

Anchor muttered under his breath as he took off after her. "Well excuse me for not wanting to hit a girl."

"This is practically a war," she told him. "An attitude like that is gonna cost us. Do you want to die in Socket's chair?"

"Not really, but I was raised to-"

"Just fight!" Defrag popped Matrix on her shoulder to free her paws and threw open a set of double doors. "Where to next, bee?"

"Gimme a sec." Matrix shook water from his computer and buzzed his wings in a desperate bid to dry himself. "That slowbro got water all over my computer."

Defrag let out a pained groan and turned blindly to the staircase. She staggered back as a rush of medicham, oranguru and stoutland bounded up towards them. She turned to head up the stairs, but yet more of Socket's army stampeded from the floors above.

Matrix darted from Defrag's shoulder and soared over the heads of those closest to them. Powder drifted from his wings, paralysing everyone it touched. Pokemon froze in their tracks, their bodies jerking as they succumbed to the stun spore. Defrag didn't wait around. She leapt over the stunned pokemon and kicked at the ones behind them, bouncing over their heads in a series of quick attacks and bounces. Those that were left got thrown left and right as Anchor barraged through them, flailing his arms in all directions. He received as many blows as he dealt out, but the momentum of his attack kept him moving forwards. Once he'd reached the bottom of the stairs, he toppled back into Defrag and placed a paw to his head.

"Feeling all right?" she asked.

"Just a little bruised and dizzy," he said. "That's why I don't generally use that move, but desperate times and all that."

"Well pull yourself together." She shoved him away from her and raised her fists. "They're still coming."

She caught a stoutland by the ears, but his snapping jaws lunged for her throat. Anchor's fist collided with the stoutland's head, and he grabbed the large pokemon from her. The stoutland's jaws snapped shut over his paw. He hissed with pain then retaliated, throwing his wounded paw back in the dog's face, sending him back into the oncoming onslaught. His large body crushed a smaller meditite and tripped another stoutland who landed at Anchor's feet.

The granbull grinned and opened his mouth wide, letting out an almighty roar. The stoutland yelped and cowered down, skittering backwards across the tiled floor. He was quickly replaced by an oranguru who grabbed Anchor in his paws.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to come with me." The oranguru flicked his leafy fan.

Anchor very nearly obliged, but the oranguru let out a grunt as a pollen puff exploded off the back of his head.

Anchor came back to his senses in time to see a ribombee dart soar towards them, trailing a thick powder. He came to a buzzing halt before Anchor and Defrag and watched as the onslaught of pokemon came in contact with the trail. It clambered up their bodies in a spiral, locking them in place as they swatted at the pestering… spores?

"What is that?" Anchor asked.

"Infestation." Matrix pawed at his computer then turned away from them. "Come on, there's a basement in this place."

"Wait a minute," Anchor said as he took off after him. "Since when did you know infestation?"

"I went to a move learner." Matrix looked back at the granbull's surprised face. "What? I don't just play video games all day."

"Coulda fooled me…"

Matrix turned back to his computer and led them towards the next flight of stairs. "Can I remind you to never listen to an oranguru? They're oddly persuasive."

Anchor rubbed his mohawk, catching Defrag's shake of a head.

His cheeks flushed under his fur. "Duly noted."

…

"Here." Surge stretched out a paw to Macro and took hold of his. "Can you stand?"

He steadied himself as she tugged him to his feet. His head span and he teetered into the wall. A flood of nausea spread through his stomach, followed by a pounding headache, and he screwed his eyes shut as he cradled his brow. Then he keeled over and brought up the contents of his stomach. Every single berry Surge had forced him to eat before allowing him to try and stand.

She sighed and released his paw, letting him steady himself against the wall.

"I think you need about a week's worth of bed rest," she said. "I can take you back to Cyan City. My ship's just outside."

"No." He shook his head, slow enough to avoid exacerbating his headache. "I'm not leaving without DL and the rest of my crew."

"But we don't even know if they're still alive," said Surge. "She almost killed you, Macro! If you go into battle like this-"

"Give me your laser."

She broke off and looked down at herself. Then fixed him with a cocked eyebrow. "What?"

"Just give me your laser and I'll go myself."

"But… that would leave me unarmed…"

So it would.

He licked his dry lips and looked past her through the bars. "I can't leave them…"

She let out a flustered sigh and brushed back her ears. "Okay, fine. I think I know where she's holding all your confiscated weapons. I'll just…"

"It'll take too long."

"Just trust me, okay?"

He met her eyes for a moment, then nodded. She sprinted from the cell and he watched her go before sinking down against the wall. Every bone and muscle in his body complained with the effort. He lifted a paw to his horn and flinched. A deep crack spread across the top where it joined the stem, and his paw came away sticky with blood. Well, that explained the headache.

A muffled laser shot came from his right and he looked up all to quickly. The room span briefly, but he fought to ignore it, focusing on two more laser fires. Then everything fell silent again. Too silent, for much too long. He let out a groan and forced himself back to his feet, using the rough stone wall as a prop. If he had to get his weapons back alone he would. There was no way he was running off like a coward, leaving his friends to die. No way he was abandoning DL when she needed him.

Just as he was about to stagger from the cell, Surge came back into the room carrying a laser in each paw.

"I don't know if they're yours," she said. "I didn't check. But here."

She stuffed one into his open paw and he flicked it open to check the cores. Grass, ground and water. That was what he used. He took the other and opened it, and his heart sank.

Empty.

With a sigh, he removed the grass core from the first one. But Surge reached up and stopped him. Over her arm was his belt pouch. He glanced down, noting it had been taken away. He took it back and fastened it around his waist. It was no easy task with a gun in each paw. Surge took over as he busied himself going through the pouch's contents. Much to his amazement, everything was still there. He took the electric core and popped it into the empty laser. At least it would help him take down some pidgeot and maybe deal some paralysis in the process. A welcome addition given he was in no fit state to use his horn for anything.

He staggered out of the cell, limping heavily on his right leg. Surge slipped an arm around his waist, and he leant into her gratefully.

"There's stairs this way," she explained. "I've no idea where they lead."

"Then how did you get in?" he asked.

"A different set of stairs, back that way." She nodded behind them. "Those lead back to the cargo docks. Unless your friends have ended up back there, then there's really no reason to go. Mind the bodies."

Macro glanced down and stepped around the fallen bodies of an espeon and herdier. Going off the amount of laser fire, he'd expected three to be taken out. But the splintered armour plating over the herdier's ribs explained the third and final shot. Their fallen bodies filled most of the narrow room between the cells and the stairs. The stairs wound up towards the floor above, each one providing Macro

with an arduous task. Half way up, he needed to stop and catch his breath. A violent cough shook his body, splattering his open paw with bloody saliva. Surge tried to hide her concern and ushered him on. They paused at the top as she busied herself with the lock.

A deep hum came from the engine that held up the mansion. It seemed to come from both sides of the walls, dulled down by the heavy stonework. If he were to hazard a guess, they weren't too far from the engine room. Macro took the opportunity to look up at the walls, searching for any sign Socket was watching them.

"If you're worried about cameras," Surge said quietly, "I've deactivated them on the basement floors."

"How've you managed that?" Macro asked.

"A hacker never reveals her secrets."

The lock pinged and the door swung towards them. She pulled Macro aside, letting the heavy door swoop back over where he'd been standing. Fierce eyes greeted them on the other side. A pair of pidgeot, their talons and beaks decked out with glinting metal blades. Their huge, feathered bodies filled the narrow corridor. One of them opened his beak, and it glowed red with heat.

Macro reached for his electric laser and fired, striking the offending bird on the chest. But it bounced off harmlessly. Macro's jaw dropped and his body lurched to the side as Surge whisked him out of the way of the pidgeot's flaming beak. Pain seared through his body, blurring his vision. He fired blindly, clipping one of the birds on the wing. A shriek filled the air, and he felt talons rake his fur, adding gashes to his injuries. Another shot hit the first pidgeot with a torrent of electricity, washing over its body and reducing the flying type to a pile of sparking, spasming feathers. The flaming pidgeot flew over it, resisting every jolt of electricity he fired. Macro threw himself to his right, landing painfully on his shoulder. He groped for his left laser and fired off a water type, striking the bird on the beak. His head snapped back with the impact, and he fell onto his back with a grunt.

Surge fired her fire laser, singing the bird's feathers and finishing him off.

She tugged Macro back to his feet and he feebly dusted himself down.

"So they make type-resisting implants now?" he scoffed.

"Only in wealthy areas." Surge ushered him away towards a small flight of stairs at the end of the corridor. "I've no idea where that leads, but I guess it's our only option. We need to be careful. Those guards I took out earlier must have alerted their friends."

She tried the door, but it opened with ease, opening towards them. A squeak left her throat and she took a step back into Macro. He peered over her shoulder into the room, meeting the gazes of Socket and her accomplice, Yobi. The latter held a cable in his paws, the other end of which was attached to a computer. A chingling hopped up and down the bed, admiring the raichu's 'work'.

A grin split the gothitelle's face and she chuckled. "Well, well. Look who's still walking. I hate to disappoint you, Hunter. But you're already too late to the party."

His fur bristled as she stood aside, letting him see the table. His paw went to his laser, hoping desperately she hadn't done anything to DL. But when he stepped into the room his heart hit his stomach.

There, on the table, lay a human, completely out cold. Switch.

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 69

A/N - Just so you know, I have now finished writing this story. It ends at eighty chapters! Yay, NaNo! I've made a start on another story set in the same universe, just… a fair bit later on. I won't say anything in depth about it yet, but if you're enjoying Reboot, it might be worth keeping an eye open ;)

Also, if you have Tumblr, or just happen to like it, I am on there as deliriousabsol (blog name 'Del's Mad World'). I've recently been posting artwork for my stories, and will try to keep updates and such like for my writing. It's a fairly new endeavor, and I'm not in the best habit with it yet, but if you give me a follow I'll try to return the favor! Also… sneak peek for my new 'fic went up yesterday…

Chapter Sixty Nine

All Macro could do was stare at Switch's unconscious body. Restrained to the table by his wrists, ankles and chest, his head lolling to one side revealing the alien jack socket. Macro's jaw was slack as he ran over potential repercussions. A creature dragged from a different time-line, his endeavors post-fracture likely significant. What damage could be done if he wasn't sent back? Or if he was sent back without any memories? Returned as a mindless computer who's only purpose was to 'serve Socket'?

The chingling perched beside Switch's head grinned from ear to ear. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Macro's claws dug into his pads and he fixed Socket in a violet leer. "What have you done to him?!"

"I think the look on your face says you know full well what I've done to him," said Socket. "Besides, you've poked around my private documents enough to know what I've done and what my plans are.

No thanks to that scruffy nuisance behind you." Her eyes flickered to Surge and Macro practically felt the zigzagoon bristle. "Download Database was nothing more than a prototype. My real target had always been a human."

"You don't need one," Macro hissed.

"Oh but I do. Goodness knows where BackDoor is up to. I still need to get out of this worl-"

Her words cut off as Macro fired his electric laser, striking her on her left ear. She stumbled backwards, her fur puffing up like a startled quilfish. Her eyes narrowed dangerously and she flicked a paw, launching a shadow ball into Macro's gut. It stung a lot more than it should have. He keeled backwards into Surge's open paws and aimed his laser at the gothitelle. Any other time he'd have thought an attempt like that was futile. But Socket knew full well in his condition all she'd need to do would be to swat him and put him out of his misery. The livid look in her eye told him she wanted to torture him. Physically. Emotionally. Mentally.

He glanced over at Switch's prone form and felt his blood boil. She'd wanted him to see this. She wanted him alive. For now…

The gothitelle strolled backwards across the room and reached behind a cabinet. She dragged out a struggling blue and white bundle of fur, limbs flailing. Chocolate eyes fixed on him.

"Macro!" DL pleaded.

A combination of relief and dread flowed through him, reigniting his fighting spirit. "DL!" He fixed his leering eyes on Socket. "Don't you dare hurt her!"

Socket dragged DL after her and tossed her through an open door.

"Macro! Help!"

He took off after her, drawing both his lasers, ignoring the pain that demanded him to stop. A yelp came from behind him as Surge leapt between him and a thunder wave from the raichu. She slumped to the floor, attempting to earth the stray electricity into the ground. She looked up at Macro and flashed her canines.

"Go after her! I've got this!"

He didn't need telling twice. He staggered into one of the cabinets, hissing with pain, and turned to chase after Socket blindly through the door.

Surge stood and aimed her laser at Yobi, but he leapt past her faster than she could fire it. She skimmed his tail, muttering under her breath. Great, he'd hampered her speed. She hoisted herself up with the examination table and looked from Switch to Yobi's retreating tail. He called to something she couldn't see. A deep hum followed, and electricity sparked in the far shadows of the room. Whatever it was, it didn't bode well. She aimed her gun at the human and snarled.

"I don't have to take you out," she warned the raichu. "I just need to kill him."

Yobi froze and looked back at her. His mouth fell open and he looked between her and the door, warring with the choice to either abandon the human or help his Mayor.

"Socket wouldn't be too happy, would she?" said Surge. "Losing her human right after you went through all that work?"

Yobi roared and leapt towards her, cheeks sparking. A huge, mechanical vikavolt soared over the cabinets, engulfing the raichu with electricity, strengthening his attacks to a deadly level. His blue eyes lit up yellow as electricity spread from every part of his body. Surge laughed and twisted her still-spasming limbs towards him, and fired.

…

Annie hummed to herself, kicking a foot back and forth as she lay sprawled on her seat. Soon. Their attack would happen soon. That's what she kept telling herself, but no one had heard lick nor tail from Switch.

The pyukumyuku lurched forwards as something collided with its rear, and Trojan swore loudly. He twisted his head towards the tail of the ship.

"Oi! Watch it!" he barked.

Waveform craned his neck around to see through the rear window, but there was nothing there. He frowned and stood up, moving towards the exit hatch.

"Would you mind not being silent for once," said Trojan, "and tell me what you think it is?"

"A cloaked ship," the decidueye explained. "It might be an attack."

"In a ship of that magnitude?" Web asked. "A government ship would be much too small to-"

A beep came from the dashboard and Trojan stared at it as though it had just started speaking in an alien language. He looked from Web to Annie to the dashboard and back.

"Answer it then?" Web suggested.

Annie waved a hand towards him. "I second that motion."

Trojan pushed the call button and a small, nervous voice came from the speaker.

'Hello?' it said. 'Is… is this a friendly ship?'

"Depends what you mean by 'friendly'," said Annie. "I'm the captain. What do you want?"

'Help,' said the voice. 'My name is Cookie. I'm currently flying Wildcard Gamma-'

"Wildcard Gamma?" Waveform gasped. "Isn't that Hunter's ship?"

'I… I…'

"That's the one Switch and DL came from," said Web.

'Yes! Exactly,' said Cookie. 'I've just been contacted. They've run into some trouble.'

Web sighed into her paws. "I feared as much."

"We were gonna give it ten more minutes," said Annie.

'I don't think we have ten more minutes,' said Cookie. 'I think we need to spring an attack, but… I've never done that before!'

"Don't worry," said Annie. "We've got this, Biscuit."

'It's Cookie.'

Poipole poked his head out of Web's tail and frowned. "She never learns. You'll be called Biscuit forever."

"Hush, Sticky. I'm working," said Annie.

Poipole sighed and vanished back into Web's fur.

"What do you want us to do?" Annie asked the intercom. "Because I was just gonna blast the place wide open and run in guns blazin'."

'That sounds fabulous,' said Cookie. 'Send me the signal and I'll… erm… I think it's this button to get the turrets out.'

"I think our new friend might need a helping paw," said Web. "Do you need a helping paw, dear?"

'I'm not sure I should let strangers on this ship. I might get in trouble.'

"This is no time for worrying about getting in trouble!" snapped Trojan. "I can send you Waveform or Web. Take your pick."

'Waveform?!' Cookie squeaked.

"I can fly," said Waveform. "Where's the ship?"

'I-I-I can lower the cloak for five seconds. I might get spotted and fired at. I'm also not a space pirate, please don't hurt me! I'm just a chef!'

"I'll fly out. Show me your ship."

Waveform leapt from the pyukumyuku and twisted in the air. Wildcard Gamma materialised as its cloak melted away, revealing the open hatch. He beat his wings and glided towards it, zipping inside just before the cloak fastened back in place.

The decidueye glanced around his surroundings, coughing on the toxic air. The hatch closed behind him, followed by a gust of clean air that expelled the toxins back out into the sky. Then the main door hissed open. The brown head of a slurpuff peered out from around a door Waveform guessed must lead to the cockpit.

"You… you're a lot bigger than I expected," Cookie muttered. "I have no bounty on my head!"

"Don't fret yourself." Waveform brushed him aside with a wing and strolled into the cockpit. "Where are your weapon controls?"

"Just here…" Cookie pointed a shuddering paw at the pilot's seat. "Everything is there. Steering, weapons, the cloak, hyper drive…"

Waveform turned his head one-eighty to look at him, taking the trembling chef by surprise. He narrowed his eyes at the slurpuff and sighed.

"Listen," he said. "I'm not hunting you or your crew right now. We've got friends in there and we need to get them out. Understood?"

Cookie nodded so fast he jiggled.

Waveform gave a curt nod and waved a wing to the captain's seat. "Sit down and talk me through your plan. We'll work alongside Time Archeops and get this ridiculous month over with."

…

Macro followed Socket through to the stairs. The door slammed shut behind her, and he aimed his gun, blasting the flimsy wood off its hinges. Splinters rained down around him as he staggered through into the entrance hall. Socket had hold of DL by the scruff, standing amid her guards and Tweak. Not one of them moved a muscle, but all attacks and weapons were cocked and ready to fire. DL struggled in the gothitelle's claws, and when she spotted Macro she fixed pleading eyes on him. Her chocolate gaze flitted over his body as she took in the damage and the blood dripping down his horn. He stood trying to catch his breath, resisting the urge to lean up against the stair rail.

His paw trembled with the effort of lifting his gun, aiming it at Socket's head. Some of the guards' modifications flared to life, droning in the silent hall.

"Let her go," he said. "Do what you want with me, but let her go."

"No," DL whined. She kicked her legs, striking Socket in the hip. "No!"

"Really?" Socket looked down at the struggling pachirisu. "He killed your family, Loop, and you want to fight for him?"

"Don't you ever call me that!" DL hissed. "Besides, he might have killed my family, but you took everything else from me!"

Those words still pained him. He placed a paw on the rail to steady himself and narrowed his eyes.

"Just let her go," he growled.

"Why should I?" Socket asked. "A disobedient child deserves to be punished. What kind of mother would I be if I just let her do as she pleases?"

"Mother?!" DL spat. "You're no mother! You're just an evil wench!"

Electricity sparked from her cheeks, spreading to the jack socket and up the gothitelle's arm. They both screamed, and Socket let DL drop to the floor. The pachirisu scurried away towards the main door, but a stoutland leapt across to cut her off. He flashed his canines and growled, freezing DL in her tracks.

Socket shook her paw and rounded on DL. "Little brat! I have every right mind to-"

Macro fired, striking Socket in the back of the head. But she brought up a psychic shield just in time, dulling the weapon's effects. She keeled forwards and rounded on him, throwing up a paw. A blast of psychic rushed across the room, lifting Macro off the floor and slamming him into the wall above the door to the basement. He howled in pain as his horn made impact with the stone. A grin split Socket's face and she pressed him harder against the wall, laughing at the mawile's cries of pain and protest.

"Stop it!" DL screamed. "Stop it! You're hurting him!"

"Of course I am, you pathetic runt!" Socket barked at her. "You two have been the mothim in my honey for too long! I want rid of you and I'm going to enjoy every… last… second!"

Before she could increase her attack, a laser beam erupted from the door beneath him. It struck Socket's paw and she released Macro, dropping him to the floor. The jolt shot pain straight through his spine

and he groaned, slumping back into Surge. Another laser beam narrowly missed his head as a medicham disarmed the zigzagoon. She yelped, watching her weapon tumble back down into the basement.

"Surge…" Socket spat. "I thought Yobi would have gotten rid of you."

"I think you'll find he's a little tied up," Surge quipped, stepping aside to stand before Macro. "I don't earn points in marksmanship to be taken out by a crazed scientist and his toys, do I?"

Feet stampeded down the stairs above them, drawing Socket's eye. "And here comes the rest of Wildcard Gamma… I doubt schooling together will give you any advantage, however."

She lifted a paw, firing out psychic energy. Screams and yelps of protest erupted above them, and Macro's crew came crashing down before him like stunned pidgeot. Anchor landed first, followed by Defrag and Matrix. The lopunny pushed herself back up, brushing back her ears. Matrix buzzed into the air, tugging on Anchor's right ear until he climbed, stunned, to his feet.

"The bigger they are, the harder they fall!" said Tweak.

Socket chuckled. "You really are all pathetic. I bet not one of you is of much use without your weapons?"

Matrix buzzed his wings in protest and lobbed a pollen puff towards the gothitelle. She caught it in her right paw and scowled at it, before crushing it into dust.

"I think it's time to try using our Z-Moves," said the ribombee.

He lifted his paw and fired out a bug buzz. The move washed over Socket as she raised a shield, leaving Matrix looking stunned.

"It didn't work?" he asked. "Why didn't it work?"

Socket burst into laughter, followed by her guards.

"What on earth was that?" said Tweak. "Someone's been playing too many video games! What are you trying to be? Heroes of the Universe or something?"

"Leave it, Tweak," said Socket. "You're as much a nuisance as the rest of them."

The chingling rolled his eyes then feigned hurt.

"Now, the question remains… what do I do with you?" Socket spread her paws. "You're clearly outnumbered. You can do nothing to me, or my army. So I can either kill you all here and now, or I could turn you all into computers! I'm leaving System anyway, so who cares if I break a few rules now? Of course, my elites would probably rebel and then I'd be put out of power. My other choice is to drag you with me into my new world, where you can be the first put to death to set an example to others! It sounds like a perfect plan, but then I'd be tainting my new home with your presence and blood." She slapped a paw to her forehead. "Oh, what a dilemma! What ever will I do?" She cracked an eye back open and grinned. "Detain them."

The psychic and normal types moved in, grabbing Anchor, Defrag, Matrix and Surge. Macro found himself dragged unceremoniously back to his feet, and he stifled a howl as the medicham grabbed him by the arm.

Electricity streaked up the basement stairs, striking Surge straight out of her detainer's paws. The pair rolled head over tail until they landed in a sparking heap beside Socket. Yobi clambered off the zigzagoon and bristled, swiping his tail from side to side.

"Oh, Yobi," said Socket, grabbing the raichu's attention. "Perfect timing. We were just discussing what to do with this lot. If you could take DL back to your basement, I'd like her returned to factory settings. Be sure to keep her memories safe while we're in System."

Macro's heart lurched and he watched the raichu advance towards DL.

"You're just gonna let her do this?" he roared at the guards, struggling in the medicham's grip. "Stop her!"

The guards were silent, stoic. Watching things unfold without a single protest. Fear? Superiority? Macro didn't know what it was, but he wasn't going to stand for it.

He snatched his laser from his captor's paws and fired it towards his feet. The medicham fell back with a yowl, releasing the mawile. Macro scrambled across the floor towards DL, overtaking Yobi and eliciting a squeak of surprise. But then there was a click. An ominous click that caused Macro to twist on the spot. The medicham had aimed a weapon, right towards Macro. He lifted his own laser and fired, intending to counter the weapon's beam. Electricity coursed from Macro's gun, meeting a brown ground laser. It ate up his attack and struck his weapon in the nozzle. Searing heat shot up his arm as the weapon exploded, blowing him backwards into DL. Heat ate away his fur, sending pain throbbing through every inch of his body. His eyes blurred and he slumped into the pachirisu's arms.

Socket leered down at them, her eyes trailing from Macro to the blood pooling on her mosaic floor.

"Tch, what a mess." She looked up at the medicham and frowned. "I aught to fire you for that."

He blanched and tossed the weapon aside.

"Tweak, go and find a mop," she said. "The rest of you, detain these criminals in the holding cells. I still want Download Database restored, so Loop-"

"You're a monster." DL fumbled with her scarf, fastening it securely around what was left of Macro's arm.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said you're a monster!" DL snapped. "You tried to make me think the pokemon trying to help me were evil, but you?! What they did was an accident. What you're doing is pure evil! Hurting others for your own enjoyment and selfish desires! You, Socket, are pure evil!"

Socket's eyes narrowed into slits and she raised a paw, advancing on DL. The pachirisu flinched away on impulse, but Socket froze as a distorted, electrical voice flooded into the entrance hall.

"Oh my, oh my," it sang. "Oh what joy, what joy! What's going on in here?" A golden ring appeared in the ceiling and BackDoor reversed out of it, lifting his arms as he reached a crescendo. "It's fear! It's fear! BackDoor is here!"

"It's about time!" Socket hissed. "Where did you get to? And what happened to your vocal processors?"

BackDoor rubbed his left horn and shrugged. "Looking for other worlds like you asked. And I got… fried a little."

"From playing with aliens, I guess? How much longer? I need to dispose of all this trash."

BackDoor turned his head left and right to take in the scene and nodded. "Oh, I see. You've been playing-ing-ing with space pirates. Oh what a mess!" He pointed to the blood. "That won't come out easily. You really need to bleach that."

"I don't need your cleaning tips. I need answers!"

"Oh, come on." BackDoor rolled his eyes. "I've been looking ever-y-where for your silly little world."

"And?"

"I'm bored." BackDoor wafted a paw before his mouth as he yawned. "I've made a friend and we've been talking… and we might have found the perfect world for you."

"Friend?" Socket hissed.

DL cowered behind Macro, clutching him tightly. She exchanged glances with Anchor, but the space pirate was too transfixed on the hoopa.

BackDoor grinned widely and waved a paw. Mist rose from his body, forming into a centipede shape beside him. Red eyes glowed from within the black mist, and a hiss split the air. The pokemon flew into a panic, and guards fired their weapons and elemental attacks. But it all drifted right through the mist as though nothing was even there.

"Meet Distortion," said BackDoor.

The entity materialised into a more solid form, six legs flickering in and out of reality as its draconic form struggled to hold. Socket stuttered and stumbled backwards into Yobi. Words failed to form and she pointed a claw at the dragon.

"This?" Distortion asked. "This pathetic creature is what you expect me to work for? To use as a host?!"

"Well, you don't think I'm strong enough," said BackDoor. "You don't think Zero Day are strong enough. What do you want?"

Distortion looked around at the mansion, twisting his long neck left and right.

"This mansion… it has power," he said. "I shall use this as my new host."

"What?" BackDoor squeaked with surprise. "A floating building?"

"Exactly."

"All right. Guess I'd better… clean it up then." BackDoor pulled a ring from his horn. He tossed it towards Socket and it expanded into a void behind her. "Welcome to your new world, Mayor! It's filled with

nothing but methane! You're going to love it!" He rolled onto his back and laughed.

Socket screamed as she fought against the void, scrambling on all fours, her claws scraping across the tile. Those beside her also scrambled for their lives, while those far enough away made a beeline for the stairs. Those more confident attacked again, their attacks bouncing off Distortion's scales. He roared and breathed out a stream of purple dragon fire. It washed over those closest to him, knocking them off their feet and burning away their fur. Several crumpled as paralysis overtook them, falling victim to yet another attack.

"Move it!" Anchor roared. "Get to Wildcard Gamma!"

He turned towards DL. The pachirisu held onto the wood surrounding the main door with one paw, while clutching Macro in the other. Her face twisted with the effort of holding on. He stretched out a paw, using the other to support himself against the door. He took hold of her wrist and threw both her and Macro behind him. Anchor joined her in scrambling for the stairs, fighting back against the increasing pull of the void.

"What about Switch?" DL shouted.

"Where is he?" Anchor asked.

"Yobi's lab! In the basement!"

Anchor glanced towards the basement. There wasn't enough time. They couldn't-

Brick and mortar exploded from the wall ahead of them, launched by an elasticated fist. Rubble bounced over the tiles to be sucked into the void. Socket's eyes widened as a large lump of stone careened into her head, breaking her hold and sending her screaming into the void.

As the dust began to settle, the nose of a gigantic pyukumyuku poked from the wall, its innards out retracting back in place. A human stood atop it, her black hair billowing in the wind.

"Viva la Rebellion!" she roared, then burst into laughter.

More explosions rocked the mansion, blowing holes in the walls and dislodging the front door. Bubbles flowed into the entrance hall, and BackDoor yelped as he swerved aside to dodge them.

"Stop them," Distortion growled. "Don't let a single one get away alive."

BackDoor obliged, tossing ring after ring around the escaping pokemon. Screams reached a crescendo as the guards were whisked away into the voids.

The black mist that formed Distortion melted away into the foundations of the mansion. Brick began to warp and distort, twisting back into place. Each stone turned black, and red eyes appeared all over the inside.

Anchor relieved DL of Macro, cradling him in one arm, then rushed towards the stairs. He bellowed for DL to follow him, but froze as a shrill scream came from behind him. DL clutched at the banister rail, her tail swishing behind her as a new void tried to drag her in. He spun on the spot, grabbing DL in his free paw. He dug his claws into the wooden stairs, straining against the void's pull. But it only intensified by the second. His claws slipped, but a sharp pain tugged at his spine as his tail jerked backwards. He turned his head to see Surge clutching the rails, straining under the joint weight of the granbull and his two friends. Her claws dragged crevices through the ornamental banister as the void tried to claim her also. With a growl, she threw her arm behind her, tugging Anchor and DL up the stairs enough for them to steady themselves on the rail.

"Get going!" she barked.

Anchor nodded his thanks and positioned himself behind DL as a meat shield. He ushered her on as he dragged himself up the stairs, his mohawk trailing backwards towards the void's pull. Defrag waited at the top and pushed DL towards the hole created by the pyukumyuku. What was left of Socket's guards milled about it, the fliers gathering up those feeling the misfortune of lacking wings.

Anchor leapt past them to join DL and Defrag on the pyukumyuku's back. The human watched the chaos in awe, her green eyes wide and her mouth forming a silent 'woah!'

"You're gonna wanna get out of here!" he told her. "There's another human in the basement if you can grab him?"

"Roger!" The human followed him over the back of her ship, then swung herself down through the door.

Purple fire careened from the bricks, washing over those left remaining. Surge dived from the commotion, stopping just before the pyukumyuku's nose to fire off a stream of laser fire. Her target was the hoopa. She shot a ring from his paw, drawing the android's eyes. They narrowed into a deadly glare, and he removed another ring from his horn. But his words and expression were drowned out in the frenzy of screams and purple flames.

Three pidgeot managed to get out before the flames engulfed them, each one carrying an ally. They faltered in the air, beating their wings to stay airborne as they watched the mansion distort and twist into some nightmarish living entity.

Anchor steadied himself and DL on the back of the pyukumyuku as it flared to life, dropping down a floor. Yelps and screams filled the air as more rubble fell away, claiming any who got in its path. The innards out launched with all the force of a missile, destroying the wall that separated them from the basement. It flicked out a second time, snatching up the contents of the laboratory before the dust even had a chance to settle. DL grimaced and shook her head, turning her eyes to the sky.

Wildcard Gamma drifted before them, launching a torrent of bubble bombs at the mansion. But rather than exploding, they shot towards the mansion and vanished. Rubble drifted back towards the hole in the wall, and a look of horror crossed Anchor's face as he stared right up into a new void. Pokemon fought frantically against it, and he glimpsed a jagged tail vanish into the ultraviolet mist.

"Surge!" he roared.

The pyukumyuku shook again, moving backwards away from the mansion. Anchor adjusted his hold on Macro and placed his free paw on DL's shoulder as he turned to look back at his own ship. A decidueye stood in the doorway, and when his eyes fell on Anchor he launched himself towards them, gliding through the destruction and fire. He didn't say a word as he latched onto DL and Anchor, whisking them from the pyukumyuku and back to the ship.

Anchor's grip slipped as a heavy weight fastened around his body. The decidueye panicked, flapping his wings frantically to stop them from plummeting towards the ocean. Anchor muttered his own frustration, securing his grip on Macro before looking down to see who'd hampered them. Defrag clutched onto his waist with a death grip, her frantic eyes on the drop below.

"Give us some warning!" Anchor gasped.

She looked up at him, her eyes wide with fear. "There wasn't enough time! Were you seriously going to leave me there?"

He grimaced and glanced back at the monstrous mansion. It looked nothing like it had previously. Dark. Black. Riddled with red eyes and spewing purple flames. So many lives had been claimed in that chaos. He tore his eyes from it and secured his paw around the decidueye's leg. Then he nodded to the passing pidgeot, pointing them towards his ship. One of them frowned, cracking its beak open in a sneer, only to be swatted by the medicham clutching its legs. It was no time to choose sides. The three flying types joined the decidueye on their retreat to Wildcard Gamma. The decidueye

twisted to avoid streams of purple fire as they spread out from the mansion, eager to claim what few lives remained. In some form of last hurrah, one of BackDoor's voids opened up before them. The decidueye beat his wings then tucked them to his sides, curving up and away from it before leveling out towards Wildcard Gamma. Anchor felt the tug and clutched tighter to the owl pokemon's talons. DL whimpered as the void almost dragged her free, and he felt Defrag claw at his torso, her long legs kicking away from the void's incessant pull. A screech drew his eye back towards the pidgeot, and his eyes widened as he spotted the closest one veer off course as he was sucked into the void. The medicham stretched out a paw, panic etched over his face. But there was nothing Anchor or his allies could do. The two pokemon vanished into the void, the ultraviolet mist swallowing them into an unknown world.

The decidueye reached the hatch, tossing Anchor and his friends ahead of him. Anchor landed first just before the cockpit, and he let out an 'oof!' as Defrag landed on his back, knocking the wind out of him. He rolled aside, checking over Macro before looking back at the chaos. The inner door was already open, allowing clouds of toxic mist onto the ship, but Anchor was more worried about the destruction than a little toxic air. He could just see the glow of purple flames through the smog, briefly blocked out by the fliers as they joined the space pirates on their ship. Once everyone was on board, the decidueye closed the hatch and air blasted out some of the toxins before the inner door sealed shut.

Anchor finally took a good look at their rescuer, and realisation hit him like a lead brick.

"Waveform?" he grunted. "What are yo-"

Waveform waved a wing in dismissal and nodded to Macro's limp body. "You worry about tending to your wounded party. I'll deal with getting us out of here."

The decidueye vanished into the cockpit, leaving Anchor gob smacked. He shook it off and poked his head into the cockpit.

"Get us to Cyan City, as fast as you can," he instructed. Then paused as Waveform glanced back at him. "Please."

"I'm already on it," said Cookie from the navigation deck.

A brief silence washed over the ship, broken by Defrag.

"So," she said. "What are we going to do with our unexpected guests?"

Anchor hadn't thought that far ahead, more concerned with getting as many pokemon to safety as he could. He looked up from Macro to the two pidgeot. A herdier, oranguru and meditite stood beside them, their expressions a mixture of awe and anxiety.

"Thanks," one of the pidgeot muttered.

"Yeah," said the herdier. "I don't think we'd have survived that."

Anchor took them all in. The pidgeot with their armored talons and wing claws, the herdier with his bionic eye, the meditite wearing small gauntlets not entirely dissimilar to Anchor's. The only one without any visible enhancements was the oranguru, but that wasn't to say he didn't have any.

"Well, I weren't gonna leave any 'mon to die in all that," said Anchor. "I ain't a monster. But I can't have you wanderin' freely on this ship so… I'm afraid you're all gonna have to stay in the cargo hold until we get somewhere safe. Understood?"

The guards nodded all too keenly. Too uncomfortable to remain on a space pirate's ship. No reason to turn them in, either out of gratitude or having no reward waiting for them now Socket had been killed. And at the artificial paws of her own creation, no less.

Anchor led them down the corridor, pausing beside Macro's room.

"Go on," said Defrag. "I'll lead our guests to the cargo hold. You deal with Macro."

He muttered his thanks, watching the lopunny lead the five pokemon through to the loot room. He tore his eyes from them and flashed his paw to open Macro's door. DL shuffled in ahead of him and paused beside the bed, watching Anchor set him down. Blood soaked into his sheets the moment he touched it. It was difficult to see his fur beneath all the blood, but it had clearly burnt away around his right shoulder and cheek. His right arm lay a bloodied mess at his side, the scarf DL had fastened around it no longer showing a hint of its former green. Yet his chest rose and fell as if he were only sleeping. Silent tears flowed from her eyes, and she whisked a paw across them, snuffling into her fur.

Anchor placed a paw on her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I'll send Cookie in. I'm no medic."

As he turned to leave, she spoke up, freezing him in the doorway.

"What do we do?"

He shrugged his shoulders and glanced back at her. "Get him to Cyan City and hope we can save him. It's all we can do."

"It's my fault, isn't it?"

Her words pained him. He shuffled his feet and took a deep breath. "It ain't no one's fault. None of us could've seen that comin'."

The door closed behind him, and DL let out a loud sob. She clambered onto the bed and fastened her arms around Macro's chest, nuzzling into his fur. Still warm. His heart pulsing against her cheek.

"I'm so, so sorry," she choked. "Please don't leave me…"

…

Anchor closed the door to the cargo bay and discarded the guards' weapons on one of the shelves. It had been surprisingly easy to

disarm them. They'd been very grateful for a rescue. So grateful he'd almost forgotten they were enemies. As he left the loot room, he spotted Cookie on his way out of Macro's door. The slurpuff looked up at him with a sombre smile while wiping his paws on a bloodied tea towel.

"How is he?" Anchor asked.

"I want to say stable, but I fear that wouldn't be accurate," said Cookie. "DL did a good job with the tourniquet but… he really needs to get to a hospital and fast."

"We're in hyper drive so… how long?"

"Another thirty minutes minimum." Cookie brushed back the berry on his head and sighed. "I don't know what to do. I'm a wreck. I'd cook something to calm my nerves, but Waveform needs me on navigation and Defrag's too busy looking after our guests." He gave a nervous glance towards the loot room.

"Navigation? Why?" Anchor's eyes widened and he snapped his head around to the exit hatch. "Wait a minute, where's Matrix?!"

…

Annie and Web tugged at the stretchy innards out, trying to gently free Switch from its hold. The human was out cold, but still breathing. But then there was the issue with the odd music playing from deep within it. Did humans normally make musical noises when they slept? Annie thought about asking Web if she'd ever made any music in her sleep, but something hairy brushed her fingers causing her to forget about it completely. Humans didn't have fur, that much she knew.

She peeled back the gooey material, revealing a tiny yellow body. A pair of wings buzzed to life, and the pokemon drifted free from his confines. He rubbed his antennae and took a few deep breaths.

"Oh!" said Annie. "Hello, bee."

The ribombee rubbed his eyes and reached into his belt pouch. The music was still playing, coming from his tiny computer. But it stopped before he could answer it.

"Are you okay, dear?" Web asked. "I think we might have caught you when we rescued Switch here."

The ribombee glanced down at the human and wound his antenna in his paw. "Yes… you did. I think I got hit with a brick or something. Whatever it was, it knocked me from the air." He took a deep breath and rubbed his head, slumping back towards the ground onto his bottom. "Ow, what a headache. You also can't breathe in that thing." He pointed a claw at the innards out.

"Oh, I know," said Annie. "I've been caught in it myself."

The ribombee shuffled and reached into his belt pouch. "Something is burning me. What did that thing do?"

He pulled out his paw, holding a crystal too big for his belt pouch. His eyes widened and he looked between it and the human. Before he could say anything, that music started up again, with more insistence, Annie thought. The ribombee adjusted his flight goggles and reached for his computer.

"Hey Anchor," he said.

"Matrix!" came a gruff voice. "Where on earth are you?"

"With Switch." The ribombee continued idly winding his antenna as he stared at Annie. "Yeah, I'm with the other human. We'll join you in Cyan City."

"Hey, you can't make that decision!" said Annie. "I'm the captain!"

"You'll want to," Matrix told her. "It's the only safe place for us space pirates, and as far as I'm aware, is one of few places completely free

of Ultra Beasts." He returned to his conversation. "By the way, Anchor, you're not gonna believe this…" A pause as the other pokemon muttered something Annie couldn't make out. "You know how in video games bags can hold like… infinite or over-sized items?" He turned the brown crystal around in his tiny paw. "Well, I think I've got a pouch full of Z-Crystals."

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 70

A/N - I've been making some embarrassing mistakes with the names of the Z-Crystals. If you notice any, please let me know. I may have to go back and fix it…

Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows!

Chapter Seventy

Macro raced through the tunnel, blackness on either side. It closed in behind him, but his eyes were on the pachirisu scurrying along ahead of him towards the light. He stretched out a paw, but nothing but silence left his mouth. He'd wanted to shout, but it hurt. Everything hurt. Every step, breath, movement. But he refused to stop. Refused to be eaten up by the darkness.

A dry heat filled his nostrils and he faltered, glancing back the way he'd come. Fire. Fire spread down the tunnel, rushing towards him like a tidal wave. He turned and kicked the ground, pushing himself onward. But he'd lost sight of her. The light was dazzling. He squinted, just making out a black speck on the horizon. Then the floor shook violently, causing him to lose his footing. Rock erupted beneath him like a geyser, and a huge metallic beast rose from the ground. Its huge mouth opened in its bamboo face, letting out an almighty scream.

Macro howled with fright, falling back onto his bottom. The beast aimed a cannon, then exploded into light. Light that put out the flames, bringing with it a refreshing coolness. Solgaleo drifted through the creature's remains and landed behind Macro, catching the mawile as strength left his body. He fell into the lion's warm fur and let his eyes drift shut.

"Where am I?" Macro asked. "Where is everyone?"

Solgaleo shushed him. "Don't talk. You need your rest."

"That's easy to say," said Macro. "But everything hurts. I can't feel my paw. I can see it, but…" He cracked his eyes open and stared ahead at the light. DL had long gone. "What's happening, Solgaleo? Is the world ending?"

Solgaleo shifted so he was looking at him. "It's the end of the world as you know it. Rest. You're going to need your strength."

…

The mansion floated miles outside of Meta City. Below Yobi, the ocean lashed the cliff face, coating the rocky outcrops with a layer of salty froth. The raichu drifted over them, his breath coming in heavy bursts. He'd been flying for hours, lugging the remains of his vikavolt android beside him in a psychic bubble. His tail skimmed over the brittle grass and dry rocks until he finally felt able to dismount, landing heavily on the ground and dropping the chrome carcass beside him. He doubled over with his paws on his knees, fighting to get his breath, and looked back over his shoulder at the purple chaos swirling across System Sky. The mansion, its red eyes glowing like stars, and the purple fire cascading out from it. He'd never even imagined such a scene in his wildest fantasies.

The chaos it had brought. The lives it had claimed. That dragon… BackDoor… Socket…

His legs gave way and he flopped onto his back, his arms falling spread-eagled beside him. His heart was still racing. He could still see her face, frantic. That brief moment she reached for him, her cry for help dying on her lips as the other world claimed her.

That was it. In an instant, she was gone. Dragged into a world no life in System could survive. If BackDoor's words had been true, she'd have died quickly amid methane gas.

BackDoor… Socket had requested it, but Yobi had been the one to create it. An android with no kill switch, for fear others might get their paws on it and deactivate it. An android who'd been programmed with a personality. With the ability to learn. Much needed requirements for something that could assist them in finding a new world. A world for System's elites, for them to start anew. And the wretched android had found something powerful, grown bored of its task, and used it against them. Used the skills Yobi had programmed it with, and killed Socket. Not just his boss, but his friend.

He choked back a sob and stretched out a paw, cold chrome meeting his fur. His claws fastened around it, but his eyes went back to the mansion.

Some way… if he just had some way to stop it…

His eyes narrowed and he pushed himself back up, dragging the remains of the vikavolt onto his lap. His eyes went towards Meta City. No longer safe. Riddled with those Ultra Beasts. But he needed to get back to his home. To his lab - old yet familiar - and put an end to BackDoor. If that meant trapping Distortion and all the Ultra Beasts in System, so be it. They'd be at his mercy. He'd rid the world of them all, or die trying.

…

Beep, beep, beep…

Macro grimaced, trying to focus on that sound. He didn't remember setting an alarm. His right arm felt like lead. Clearly he'd slept on it and lost all feeling. He lifted his more obedient left paw and rubbed his eyes, grunting as a dull ache resonated in his head. He couldn't recall the previous night. No drinking and merriment. Then he remembered the pain. His eyes cracked open, bright, florescent light stabbing his eyeballs and aggravating his headache into a migraine. He groaned and squeezed them shut, clasping his paw over them. Something tugged at his flesh, a minor stab in the back of his paw.

"Cap'n!" Anchor leapt from his seat and jerked the bed as he leant across it.

Macro cracked one eye back open and the granbull's pink face filled his vision. Matrix peeked out behind his ear, clutching his computer in both paws.

"Man, I don't believe it," said Anchor. "The doctor thought you were gonna be out another week at least."

"Wait, where…" Macro's voice cracked and he licked his lips.

A cool glass of water touched his left paw and he took it gratefully, glancing sideways to see DL putting the jug back on his nightstand. He sipped at his water and tried to push himself up, but Anchor pinned him back down. Then he busied himself with untangling the drip's tube from around the mawile's arm.

"Not yet, Cap'n," he said. "You've only just come round. I don't think you're ready for gettin' up and bein'… well… you."

"So I'm in hospital again?" Macro sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Gettin' a little tired of waking up here."

"I think they're getting a little tired of seeing you," said Matrix, eyes back on his computer.

Macro frowned at him, then shook his head. "What happened? How long was I out?"

"Ten days," said Anchor.

"Ten days?!" Macro sat bolt upright, only to be pushed back into his pillow by DL this time.

Anchor brushed back his mohawk and fell back into his seat. "Yeah, after that… Distortion thing… took over the mansion, things took a pretty brutal turn. We were fortunate enough to get out of there and get you back here."

"Wait, what?" Macro's lip curled into a frown. "Distortion? What happened?"

"Oh yeah, you were unconscious then." Anchor cleared his throat. "It's a long story and you've only just woken up, so…"

"No, I need to know," said Macro. "What's Socket done to her mansion?"

"It ain't Socket," said Anchor. "It's some entity BackDoor's dragged into this world. Socket… well, she's gone."

Macro's jaw dropped. Had he heard him right? "Gone where?"

"She's dead," said Matrix, all too bluntly. "Got sucked into some world filled with toxic gas."

Any words Macro had died on his lips. He cast a sideways glance to DL, catching her eye. She diverted her gaze to the wall and swallowed back tears.

"I guess… we don't need to worry about her anymore, huh?" she said.

"Well, I guess it makes sense to be upset," said Anchor. "She did adopt you, after all."

"With bad intentions," said DL. "She may have been a monster, but I didn't want her to die. I don't want anyone to die. All those lives… even Surge…"

Macro's eyes widened. "Wait… Surge?"

DL nodded stiffly.

"Yeah," said Anchor. "She had our backs all the way out. If it weren't for her, DL and I… and you… would have been sucked into the same world Socket found herself in."

"She was oddly strong," said DL. "Managed to throw all three of us behind her."

"Must be all those enhancements she had done," said Matrix. "Makes you wonder what it was."

Macro's throat tightened and he let his eyes close, placing his paw across them. He'd often been at odds with Surge, but she'd saved his life. More than once. She hadn't deserved that. He bit his tongue to stifle tears and took in a deep breath.

"Are you okay?" DL whispered.

He nodded, but he wasn't sure if she'd noticed.

"What about Switch?" he croaked.

Anchor let out a sigh and slumped forward on his knees. "He's goin' through the same rehab those little bug pokemon are."

Macro couldn't even look at him. He bit his lip hard, tasting blood. No memories, and with Socket's mansion taken over there was no way to even begin attempting to recover them. That is, if they were even still intact in Yobi's computer.

"It's worryin'," Anchor went on. "Nothin' we can do about it." He stood up with another sigh. "I suppose I should let a doctor know you've come around."

"Give me a few minutes," he said. "I don't want one sent in just yet."

"But they need to know."

"And they can know." He shifted his arm to look at the granbull. "But I've got a lot to take in right now. I don't need some doc pokin' at me."

Anchor stared at him for a moment, then nodded. "Sure. I'll ask 'em to come in here in about ten minutes. But they won't be happy."

"Five will be fine," said Macro.

"That's why I said ten. They'll probably try and negotiate." Anchor winked then turned to leave the room.

Wink…

Macro grimaced and huddled into his sheets, unable to remove the human from his mind.

"You look a little iffy," said Matrix. "Still, glad to see you awake." He drifted from his chair and buzzed over their heads to the door. "I'm gonna get a coffee. Do either of you want anything?"

DL shook her head and Macro muttered a 'no'.

Once the door closed, Macro glanced over at DL, but she didn't meet his eyes. It gnawed at him. An unpleasant sensation alongside the pounding headache.

"You're not going with them?" he asked.

She looked away from him towards the window, her paws wound in his bed sheet. "No."

"Very well." He let his arm fall over his eyes again. The room felt oddly quiet. He opened his mouth to tell her she didn't need to stay, but she cut him off.

"I owe you an apology."

Her words took him by surprise and he lifted his paw to look at her. But she was still avoiding his gaze.

"I… was hurting." Her voice cracked and she twisted the bed sheet in her claws. "You've done a lot for me, but I couldn't see past the blind rage that came with those memories. They conflicted me. No matter how much I'd tell myself I was wrong, it… it just wouldn't

work. It was like I was two separate pokemon and Loop just wouldn't listen…"

He gave her a moment to continue, but she stared down at her paws, tugging at the sheet.

"Believe it or not," he said, "I do understand."

"Then you're foolish."

Her words took him aback and he let his head roll back on the pillow, shielding his eyes again. "I don't know how understanding makes me a fool, but whatever."

"Because my actions were irrational," she said. "I said hurtful things… I hurt you, and you didn't deserve it." Her words choked off into tears and she wiped her eyes with a paw. "And if it weren't for me… you wouldn't have gone after me in Meta City… and all this…" She sobbed loudly and covered her face with her paws. "You almost died and it was my fault!"

"Hey!" He pushed himself up on his elbow and twisted to face her. "Don't you dare blame yourself! We needed to go there for your final memories anyway."

"But it wouldn't have been such a reckless attempt! You… you came to rescue me, didn't you?"

"I came to help you." His strength gave out and he fell onto his side, but he didn't take his eyes off her. "Whatever happened, Socket would have known we were coming. We'd have been walkin' right into trouble. She'd have still caught me." He paused and trailed his paw over his horn. Still cracked, although it had been sealed with something.

"What did she do to you?" DL whispered.

Tears trailed from her cheeks, peppering the bed sheet. His paw twitched as he warred with the desire to hold her and calm her down. Surely if he told her it would just make her break down and blame herself even more. He closed his eyes and sighed.

"You don't need to know that," he said.

"Maybe I don't want to," she said. "Anchor and Matrix refused to go into detail. Defrag won't say anything, either." She took in a trembling breath and dried her eyes. "But you can't keep hiding things from me."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You're an enigma," she said. "I found out about Digit from Anchor a while back. And about how you got your scar, although I barely got any details. And you never told me about that fire in Botnet City." She paused and looked him in the eye. "Would you have ever told me about that? If I never got those memories?"

Her paws fell back onto the sheet and he stared at her for a moment, his claws twitching mere millimetres from hers.

"Maybe," he said. "If you'd ever asked me what all my nightmares are about. It's… something I don't want to keep reliving."

Her breath trembled and she looked down at her paws again. "I understand."

"Hey, I don't want to keep secrets from you. If you ask me anything about my past, I'll answer. Socket trying to kill me, Ironclaw almost takin' my eye… Even Digit ditchin' me… I'll tell you."

DL looked him in the eye. "She prefers Defrag now."

A hint of a smile.

Macro threw his left paw in the air and rolled back onto his back. "I suppose I can't very well complain about her changin' her name, can

I?"

"I keep thinking back at my own past," said DL. "And when I do, all I can see are Loop's drawings of Wildcard Gamma. The ship in flames… she really hated you." Once again, she stared at her paws. "Her last thoughts when Yobi was about to operate on her… were how if you hadn't killed her family…"

Her voice choked off as tears fell onto her paws and the bed sheet. His paw felt cold, and he retracted it slightly.

"I know a sorry will never be enough," he said. "But I'm afraid it's all I can offer."

She looked up at him, but her eyes were soft, and wet with tears. "You risked your life to save mine. That's more than enough."

"Of course." His voice cracked. "DL, please believe me when I say I would never do anything to hurt you deliberately. But… I'd understand if you still hate me."

She shook her head and released the sheet, fighting back tears. She took his paw and clambered off her seat towards him, leaning across the bed to catch his lips in hers. His breath snagged with surprise and he slipped his paw from hers to trail over her cheek and cradle her right ear.

She pulled back slightly and brushed her nose against his. "I love you."

His heart did a somersault and he opened his eyes to gaze into hers. Warm fondue. Enough to get lost in.

"Oh, DL," he said. "I love you, too."

She smiled and brushed her lips against his, prompting him to kiss her again. He pushed himself up on his right elbow and she wrapped her arms around his neck, deepening the kiss. He pulled back to

nuzzle her neck and lifted his arms to wrap around her waist. But his right one still felt heavy. Something wasn't right at all. He pulled back from her to remove his arm from the sheet and his eyes widened as he took it in.

DL combed her claws through the fur on his shoulder and closed her eyes. "Your paw… I'm afraid they couldn't save it."

Black, metal claws formed up some mechanical attachment. Layered armor that reached up to his elbow, allowing full flexibility. It was reminiscent of the enhancements many pokemon had done. Yet whoever had made it had put a lot of thought into its convenience. It was light, although not as light has his natural paw had been. The colour, size and shape was meant to emulate the paw of a mawile, although it did lack paw pads. To top it all off, embedded in the back of his 'paw' was the Fairium-Z. A soft pink light trapped amid all the black, metal plating. He flexed the claws with some difficulty. No feeling. That explained the 'dead arm'.

A monstrous thing. Unnatural. It made him feel vile.

She brushed her paw over it, but he snatched it back.

"Don't," he said. "I don't trust it."

"But… why? They said it's 'state of the art'."

"I can't feel anything." He shrugged, bitterness taking over. "If I can't feel anything, then I'm worried it might hurt you."

"You're meant to have feeling in it." She took a breath and pushed herself off the bed. "I'll go see where that doctor's got up to."

He looked away from her as she scampered to the door, leaving him clutching the duvet in a tight fist. He kept his mechanical arm to the side, as far from his body as his dead arm would allow.

"Macro?" DL looked over at him from the door, catching his eye. "If it means anything… as much as I'm sorry you lost your paw… well…"

He raised an eyebrow, bitterness melting away to amusement. "You like this contraption, don't you?"

Her eyes flitted from him to the mechanical paw and a light flush dusted her cheeks. "It is rather fetching."

He rolled his eyes and chuckled, then nodded towards the door. "Go and find that doctor."

She gave a brisk nod and scampered from the room, leaving him to chuckle to himself as he flopped back onto his pillow. The air felt a lot lighter, and warmer. A pink glint flickered at the corner of his eye, and he turned his head towards his right paw. The Fairium-Z glittered in the sunlight as it leaked through the window. A warm pink. His mechanical claws twitched against the bed sheet. Another failed attempt to turn it into a fist.

The door opened, and he pushed himself up as an azumarill shuffled in. She looked up from her Clipboard to give him a brief nod and a smile before falling into the chair Anchor had previously occupied.

"Good to see you up," she said. "You're looking much better than you did when you arrived. How are you feeling?"

"A little bitter about my paw right now," he said.

"Yes, I'm sorry about that." The azumarill's face fell and she turned back to her Clipboard's screen to key something in. "Anchor says your laser exploded. You're very lucky you didn't lose the entire limb. Or your life, for that matter."

Macro sighed and rubbed his scar. "It's a little difficult to look on the bright side right now, doc. I tend to rely quite heavily on my right paw and I can't even move it."

"At all?"

"Okay, I can get the thing to twitch. But I'd hardly call that moving it."

The doctor 'hmm'd' as she scrolled through her notes. "Well, you are put down to have therapy to control it. So they're not expecting you to be able to do much with it yet. And it can take a few days for the sensors to respond while your body gets used to it."

"A few days? When was it attached?"

"Five days ago." She gave him a reassuring smile. "So I wouldn't worry too much just yet."

He let out a long breath, but it certainly wasn't out of relief. "Well, a lot of pokemon lost their lives in that battle. So I suppose I should be happy I just got away with a lost paw and some bruises, eh?"

"Bruises?" The azumarill's jaw almost hit the floor. "Are you serious?"

"Deathly." He fixed one eye on her and cracked a smile. "You're the one who's hinting I should be lookin' on the bright side. So when can I get this therapy over and leave this joint? I've got a job to do."

"Macro, you've been in a coma for nearly ten days," she said. "Not only did you lose your paw, but a lot of blood. Your horn had cracked open and had to be sealed. You suffered three breaks in your left arm, not to mention a shattered bone in your paw; a fracture in your right arm; a break in the femur of your left leg; blunt trauma to various parts of your body; shattered ribs all along your left side; a severe concussion; internal bleeding; a punctured lung, and ruptured vessels in your left eye!" She sighed and lowered the Clipboard to her lap. "When you arrived here, we weren't even sure we could save you. You've been awake for fifteen minutes and you're asking if we think you're fit to leave?"

A long silence passed between them as her words struck home. Each one making him increasingly aware of the repetitive beeping

from his heart monitor. A cruel drag back into reality. Prior to that it had been a mere background sound that had followed him out of his dream. His eye wandered to the screen attached to the wall. The green line that flickered with every beat of his heart. He turned back to the nurse and tried to appear stoic.

"I didn't ask 'if'," he said. "I asked 'when'."

She stared at him silently, then turned back to her Clipboard. "I see. Well… you'll need to be monitored to make sure you don't relapse back into a coma. So… if things go well, I'd say you can start therapy tomorrow afternoon."

"Great."

"At the earliest."

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his muzzle. "The world might have ended by the time I'm outta here."

The azumarill closed her eyes and her ears drooped. "I'm just doing my job." She stood and shuffled towards the door. "I'll be back before dinner time."

"Hey, doc."

She looked up at him, meeting his eye.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm just… this is pretty darn stressful. I'm tryin' to help System recover from these monsters, and…"

"I understand. All of us are terrified." She took a deep breath to steady herself. "But this is the third time you've ended up here in the space of a month. You're mortal, like the rest of us. Remember that."

She slipped from the room, leaving behind a chill that caused Macro to burrow under his sheets until only his head was poking out. He groped at his chest with his left paw, feeling nothing but fur. His eye flew around the room, scouting for his scarf. Nothing. He groaned

and resigned himself to clutching the duvet, wishing he could just fall asleep and wake up to everything being normal again. But it never came. He just lay there listening to the repetitive, scolding beep of the heart monitor.

…

It felt like Tracer had been flying around System Sky for a decade. One short trip back to Pulse City revealed the entire island to be engulfed with vines, the monstrous creature standing tall over it like a sentinel. Silent. Unmoving.

The image chilled the delphox to the core, and he huddled at the back of N0ize's ship beside Widget. The eevee was less bothered, idly pawing at a laser module he'd found a few days prior. The two space pirates had barely said a word since the events in the analogue isles. Both were clearly stressed, and Tracer didn't want to push his luck perchance they toss him from the ship to a grisly demise below. Fuel was running low, and was becoming harder to come by. Not wanting to chance another trip to the analogue isles, and finding Pulse City unable to supply them safely, the two space pirates had resigned to looking for parked ships to pilfer it from. But it was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

"Ey, you seen that?" N0ize's voice drew Tracer's eye to the window.

The incineroar pointed a claw through the cracked glass. In the distance floated a monolith of a building. Whatever it was, it was almost indescribable. It gave off an iridescent purple glow, almost draining all light from around it. Or did it actually drain all light? It was difficult to say for certain, but it looked like it might have been on fire. Was it one of those monsters?

"What on earth is that?" Widget stood on his hind legs with his paws on Cyph3r's chair, both eyes fixed on the anomaly.

"I've no idea," said Tracer. "But I'm loathe to go near it."

"I second that." N0ize turned to the magmortar. "Steer us well clear of that thing. I don't want yet more damage comin' to old Sharkie."

Cyph3r obliged, turning the ship so the anomaly was on their left. Miles away.

"You've still no idea where we're going?" Tracer ventured to ask.

"Nope." N0ize turned back to Cyph3r, brushing the delphox off. "Hit hyperdrive. I wanna get as far away from that abomination as possible."

Tracer rushed back to his spot in the corner, but before he could sit comfortably, the ship lurched forward sending him nose-first into the wall. He pushed himself back up as best he could, rubbing his sore snout. A thin stream of blood coated his fur and he huddled against the wall to steady himself. Widget clutched to the magmortar's chair for dear life, his claws tearing rivets in the leather. Yet more damage the space pirates would blame them for.

Finally, the ship returned to a saner pace and Tracer slid to the floor. Back amid the floating cities. Three of them, forming a triangle, but they were really miles apart. The closest one looked massive in comparison to its siblings. The trio of warring cities. Cyan, Magenta and Luma.

"Oi, hang on a sec!" N0ize leaned forward in his seat, grinning like a lunatic. "That's Wildcard Gamma!"

Tracer jolted and lifted his head as far as it would stretch. N0ize wasn't wrong. Docked in Cyan City's port was the famous schooling wishiwashi, dwarfing several golden government ships. The pyukumyuku stood on the other side of the fleet, sandwiching them between the two larger ships.

"What's Hunter's crew doing so blatantly in Cyan City?" Tracer voiced. "And Annie, too…"

"I dunno," said N0ize. "But fifty thousand credits for him and each of his crewmon is sat waitin' in that city like sittin' ducklets. I can grab them, get my revenge on that human girl and her posse then book it! So that's…" He counted off on his claws, struggled then threw his paws in the air with a laugh. "A lot of fuel and easy ship repairs, plus enough to dine like kings!"

Widget muttered under his breath, "Yeah, if there's anywhere still left standing in System to eat."

"What were that, pup?" N0ize growled.

Widget merely grinned back at him.

"Whatever." N0ize shrugged him off and turned back to the window. "Let's get in there and find Hunter. I want my ship repaired pronto."

Cyph3r steered the sharpedo into the docks beside the wishiwashi. Before it had even fully parked up, the incineroar was on his feet and marching towards the door. He grabbed Tracer by the scruff, dragging him to his feet.

"Come on, fuzz, I ain't exactly gonna leave you and your rogue on this ship alone, am I?"

"Dang it!" Widget dropped to his feet and slumped after them. "It's like you can read me like a book."

As much as the eevee was joking, it went straight over N0ize's head. He gave Widget what was clearly intended to be an intimidating grin but all it did was elicit one in return. N0ize laughed and threw the door open.

"I like you, pup," he said. "The offer still stands if you wanna join my crew."

"I don't work for bullies." Widget skipped past him onto the docks, and froze. "Oh, hang on."

N0ize landed heavily beside him, clutching Tracer by the collar in one paw. Waiting on the docks stood an empoleon and several other water types. The vaporeon beside the penguin pokemon bristled, his head lowered and canines bared. N0ize reached for his laser, but the deep, electrical hum beside them told them Cyph3r had disembarked and had his railgun at the ready.

"Drop your weapons!" the empoleon roared. "And explain yourselves! What are you doing in Cyan City?"

N0ize laughed and dropped Tracer, who landed in an ungraceful heap at his feet. "I ain't explainin' nothin'! Cyph3r? Take 'em out!"

The magmortar raised his railgun, the hum rising into a shrill scream. The empoleon readied an attack of his own as he raised his right flipper. A metallic sheen surrounded it. Beside him, steam erupted from the vaporeon's mouth.

"Stop!"

The empoleon froze, his flipper returning to normal, but the vaporeon's attack was too advanced and he choked, spluttering hot froth. It erupted from him in a sputtering flurry, peppering Cyph3r and N0ize with scalding water. The two fire types grimaced, and N0ize whipped out his huge laser.

A frogadier scurried between the warring groups, waving his slender paws. His eyes went from the empoleon and his crew to the space pirates, and he narrowed his eyes.

"I trust you aren't friends of Wildcard?" the frogadier asked.

"No, we ain't." N0ize raised his laser to the frog pokemon. "And we plan to take 'em back with us."

Cyph3r placed a paw on N0ize's arm, lowering his laser as he aimed his railgun at the frogadier. Electricity screeched along it,

concentrating its deadly power behind the hidden projectile. If the water type was afraid, he didn't show a single hint of it.

"I'm afraid it won't get you anywhere," he said. "Socket's no longer around to give you your 'reward'."

"Eh?" N0ize's jaw dropped.

Cyph3r lowered his railgun, the screech returning to a static hum. His face matched N0ize's surprise perfectly.

"Surely you've seen it?" said the frogadier. "Her mansion has been taken over by some unknown entity, and its currently drifting through System Sky."

"That's what that thing was?" Tracer stood up, rubbing his ears. "It was her mansion?"

"So it's some monster house now?" Widget chuckled and wagged his tail. "Bring it!"

Tracer placed a paw on the eevee's back, but he didn't take his eyes off the frogadier. "So what does that mean exactly?"

"It means," said the vaporeon, "that System ain't got no flippin' mayor enforcing her laws! You won't get scratch for turnin' in Wildcard Gamma. You could gallivant across System Ground and no one would touch you because, let's face it, no one wants to fight for nothin'! So get your mangy tails out of our city!"

The empoleon cuffed him around the ears, eliciting a protesting whine.

"Thank you, HeatSink." The frogadier turned back to the space pirates. "Sorry for my friend's outburst. I have no gripes with you pokemon. I'm aware Pulse City has been reduced to ruins, which means you've got nowhere to go. We're a peaceful city. Wildcard

have done a lot for us. I can see your ship is in bad shape, so if you promise to remain peaceful, then we can sort you out with repairs."

N0ize threw his head back and laughed. "You serious?! Scourge of the skies and you open your doors for us? Well… I ain't entirely sure how happy I am mixing with water types."

Cyph3r's railgun hummed to life again, but he didn't lift it towards the water types. He narrowed his eyes, limb twitching with uncertainty.

"Oh hey, it's the pussycat!" Annie's familiar voice erupted behind the water type army. She waved an energetic wing, bouncing on her feet. "Hi, pussycat! And Mister Fox, too! Woo! It's like a reunion!"

N0ize glared at her, clutching his paw into a fist around his laser. The metal creaked beneath his grip, setting Tracer's fur on end as he braced himself for the weapon to fire at the ground. The incineroar snapped his head back around to the frogadier.

"All right," he growled. "I'll take you up on your hospitality. You might have no gripes with us, but I've got… personal issues… with that raggy bird back there."

"What? Annie?" The frogadier looked between N0ize's sneer and Annie's beaming grin. "Well… I'm not sure what to do about that. If you wish to avoid conflict-"

"Not at all."

"Well, if you threaten violence, I will have to put you in a cell." The frogadier gave him a sympathetic shake of the head. "I don't think either of us want that?"

N0ize holstered his weapon and nodded to Cyph3r to switch his off. The magmortar obliged, contributing to the sudden silence.

The frogadier stepped closer to them and held out a paw. "Welcome to Cyan City. My name is Jumper, Governor of this city. Would you

like me to show you around?"

N0ize's muzzle creased with confusion as he stared at the frogadier's outstretched paw. He shook it hesitantly, drowning it in his larger, hairy one.

"Not sure I want showin' around, though," he rumbled.

"Well, I know a fantastic place for dinner," said Jumper.

"Sold." N0ize stomped past him with Cyph3r in tow. "I'm itchin' for a fish burger right now."

"I hate to disappoint you, but here, we're vegetarian," said Jumper.

N0ize stared at him over his shoulder, aghast. Then he sighed. "Fine. Nutpea it is."

Tracer and Widget stared after them, their jaws almost touching the floor. The water army wore equal expressions of surprise. Annie scrambled over to them, looking between the pirates and the detectives.

"This is awesome," she said. "I wondered what had happened to you lot."

"Didn't we attack you?" Widget asked, not looking away from N0ize's swishing tail as he followed Jumper into the city.

"Let flygons be flygons." Annie waved a dismissive wing. "Wanna grab somethin' to eat? I know an awesome place."

"So long as it's far away from them, I'm game," said Widget.

"Me too." Tracer reached into his pocket for a cigar and grimaced. "Maybe we can find a decent shop, too? I need to stock up."

Widget snorted and shook his head. "Fine. But can we do that on the way back? I'm starved."

The pair of them followed Annie into the city, heading a different way to the space pirates.

"While we're there," she said, "I can tell you the awesome story about how a building ate the mayor!"

Tracer and Widget snapped their heads around to look at her.

"You know what happened?" Widget gasped.

"Of course!" She fired them a toothy grin over her shoulder. "I was there! And it was awesome."

Tracer and Widget stuttered and exchanged glances. 'Awesome' wasn't exactly a word Tracer would have used.

"All right." He cleared his throat. "We look forward to it."

"Awesome, eh?" Widget shook his head and sighed. "Drat, and we missed it."

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 71

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D Again, if you've not found me on Tumblr, I'm 'deliriousabsol' on there. (Blog name 'Del's Mad World') I post fan art, sneak peeks and progress updates for my (hopefully!) upcoming story System: Outbound!

Chapter Seventy One

Purple tendrils rose up on the horizon as the glowing mansion swiftly approached Seed City. Yobi watched with a combination of horror and fascination, the remains of his vikavolt android clutched in his paws. It was definitely lower in the sky, as though it was going to land.

Incomplete. His plan was incomplete, and he was swiftly running out of time. He'd have to move… but where?

…

Tweak sang jovially as he flopped around the mansion. The feather duster in his tiny paws flicked over the windowsills and skirting boards, and a quick flick of his psychic shot it up into the high corners of the eaves.

'Cut out that infernal singing!'

Distortion's voice rocked the walls, causing the chingling to spin on the spot. The feather duster fell gracefully back into his paws and he grinned widely.

"But it's my cleaning montage!" he jingled. "Everything has to be clean! You don't want to be dusty, do you?"

A low growl shook the air and Tweak laughed, spinning back to the wall and sending the duster back up to sweep across the ceiling.

"He hazzzz a po-point." BackDoor drifted down from above him, reclining back with his arms folded behind his head. "It is so… so annoying."

"So is your fractured speech," said Tweak. "But you don't hear me complaining about it."

BackDoor snorted and reached up for one of his rings. "If it were my choice, I'd send you to join Socket. But for some reason, he decide-de-ded to keep you around."

"I'm a qualified PA, cleaner and System navigator!" Tweak saluted. "No one knows System like I do."

BackDoor frowned and crossed his arms in indignation. "'System navi-vi-gator' isn't even a thing!"

"'Navigator'," Tweak mocked. "And it is a thing. You'll see what I mean when we land in Seed City. The real capital of System."

"Historically speaking," said BackDoor. "I still think you're a lunatic."

The hoopa drifted back towards the eaves, leaving the chingling to return to his dusting. BackDoor's eye drifted back towards the floor, noting the hefty blood stain. Three days the chingling had spent cleaning that. It hadn't come out. When he'd inquired about whether or not Distortion could just distort it out, he'd said he wasn't bothered. The mansion was a means of growing his strength, and because of that it was only temporary.

Whatever that meant.

BackDoor's eyes went to the window, fixing on the skyline of Seed City as it grew ever closer. A smile tugged at his artificial lips and he chuckled. He itched to find out.

…

The small restaurant was one of Cyan City's finest. Relatively quiet and more of a family scene than the posh, upscale restaurants of Meta City. Gentle music played from the hidden speakers while various water pokemon nattered. Some fired occasional glances at the newly arrived space pirates, which had led Jumper to ordering a booth for extra privacy.

N0ize poked at his nutpea burger with a suspicious claw. Tamato relish leaked out to join a small salad leaf on the plate. Resigning himself to the only palatable option he could think of, he scooped up the burger and took a bite. His confused disgust melted away into bliss and he took another bigger bite then leant back in his seat.

"Is it okay?" Jumper asked.

"It ain't bad," said the incineroar.

Cyph3r didn't look as impressed, taking small cautious bites of his cornn dog. N0ize chuckled at his expression and returned to his own meal.

"I hope that doesn't put you off, Cyph3r," said Jumper. "There are loads of options here to suit all pokemon."

N0ize grunted and spoke with his mouth full. "Pretty welcomin' place this, given the circumstances. You usually welcome criminals in?"

"No, but I'm an understanding pokemon," said Jumper. "Wildcard was only welcome here after they ended Luma City's invasion. It showed me that space pirates are pokemon too. And given your circumstances - ruined ship, no home to go to - I'm opening Cyan City's doors to you as well."

N0ize huffed and shrugged his shoulders. "Pretty noble."

Cyph3r said nothing, picking at his meal with his only paw.

"So…" N0ize licked his lips and shoved aside his empty plate. "Who's gonna take over Socket, eh? Someone's gotta dish out these rewards."

"Rewards?" Jumper cocked an eyebrow.

"Yeah, rewards! You might have a little bubble over Hunter and his crew, but they've still got a price on their heads-"

"Which is nullified." Jumper narrowed his eyes, keeping them on the incineroar's. "As far as I'm concerned, all bounties died with Socket. That includes your own. There will be no rounding up space pirates, at least not in my city."

N0ize leered back at him and folded his arms. "I don't really think it's your place to say."

"I'm Governor of this city," said Jumper. "It is well in my right to say. Socket appointed me herself when the water dwellers demanded a voice in office. She didn't want a fish, so she picked me. And I have you know I am against most of the laws she laid down, and that includes taking a life, criminal or not!"

Cyph3r shoved his plate so hard it skittered across the table and smashed onto the floor. A deep hum resonated from his railgun and he rose from his seat and aimed it at Jumper. The frogadier's eyes widened and he leapt into the air, grabbing hold of the rafter above him. The electricity flashed from the railgun's coil with an earsplitting screech, narrowly skimming his feet. Someone behind him grunted and Cyph3r tutted and aimed his weapon up at Jumper. The frogadier grabbed a pawful of frubbles and flicked them at the weapon. They coated it in a sticky foam just as a torrent of mud struck it, clogging the mechanisms and drowning the electrical current. Cyph3r grimaced and shook it violently, scattering wet mud onto the floor. But most of it stayed in place along with the frubbles.

Jumper dropped to his feet, mouth twisted with anger. He spotted Torrent the quagsire as he waddled over to him, wiping mud from his

lips. The quagsire's eyes were fixed on a spot behind Jumper. He turned to spot HeatSink with a flipper clasped to the right of his chest. Blood trickled from his claws and static danced over his oily feathers. Floppy panicked beside him, running in circles and whining, pawing at the empoleon to answer whether or not he was all right. But HeatSink could only stare at the magmortar's soiled railgun.

Then HeatSink sank to his knees, dropping his flipper and allowing the blood to trail from a perfectly round hole in the plating of his chest.

Floppy spun on his heel to leer at the magmortar. "You… you…" He shook his head then opened his mouth, firing out a spiraling torrent of water. It struck Cyph3r in the gut, sending him flying backwards over the booth to crash down on another table. Surprised squeals followed and a family of marshstomp and their mudkip kits fled towards the exit.

N0ize blinked in confusion and craned his head around to the booth. "You moron!" He turned back to Jumper and rubbed the back of his head. "Sorry 'bout that, I think he's just really cheesed off."

"Cheesed off…" Jumper shook his head and dashed towards HeatSink. "Speak to me."

HeatSink's eyes rolled back and he lolled sideways into the frogadier. Blood began to pool on the floor and Jumper reached into his bag for something - anything - to cover it with. A small audience had begun to gather around them and someone shouted about calling for an ambulance. Floppy let out a whine, his huge black eyes wet with tears.

Jumper pointed a paw towards the booth. "Apprehend him!"

The vaporeon obeyed, dashing towards the booth with Torrent. N0ize made to move towards Jumper, but the vaporeon cut him off with a nip at the heels.

"Don't you dare!" he growled before vanishing into the booth.

"I'm helpin'!" N0ize threw his paws in the air then joined Jumper. "Let me see."

"So you're an expert in first aid now?" Jumper leered up at him as he resigned to using his neckerchief. "As far as I'm concerned, you're both in this together."

"Hey, I didn't fire it!" N0ize growled. He shoved Jumper aside and held HeatSink up, then nodded. "I'm familiar with these wounds, been hit with enough of 'em meself. They're gonna wanna know what caused it."

Jumper stared at him, aghast, his eye going towards the magmortar coated from head to toe in Torrent's mud.

"He gets angry," N0ize explained. "I've been on the receivin' end of that railgun, although nothin' fatal. It's a pachinko ball launched by an electromagnetic thingy."

"Pachinko ball?" Jumper spat.

"Aye. It'll be lodged in there somewhere. They'll need to get it out."

Floppy bounded to his side, eyes fixed on the empoleon. "So they can save him?"

"Dunno." N0ize stood up and looked back at their booth. "Tore up that wall real nice though."

Jumper followed his gaze. Part of the booth had been torn away neatly. A perfect, tiny, round hole nicked into the side of the woodwork.

"That would have slowed it," he said.

N0ize shrugged. "I dunno much 'bout physics. I just shoot stuff."

A siren cut through the air, followed closely by three paramedics. Two of them dropped to HeatSink's side, while the remaining one - a bibarel - approached Jumper.

"What happened, Governor?" he asked.

Jumper stood and gave the bibarel a nut-shelled version of the events complete with what N0ize had told him. The incineroar remained with the paramedics, adamant to help, but he only found himself shooed away. The two smaller pokemon, an azumarill and wartortle, struggled to hoist the heavy empoleon onto the stretcher. The bibarel jumped at this and gave Jumper a nod.

"Come along," he said. "You can tell me everything on the way."

He joined the other two as Jumper assisted to even out the weight at either end.

"You know," said N0ize. "It'd be a lot easier if you just let me carry him!"

The paramedics left the space pirate with Floppy, Torrent and his detained companion. He looked between the two water types' leers then met Cyph3r's eye just as the police pokemon ushered them out.

A growl rose in N0ize's throat. "You and your jackin' railgun."

…

Tracer and Widget strolled along towards the park, the former clutching an ice cream dripping pink droplets onto the grass. It dripped over the long, lush blades to mix with the dry soil. Somehow, it felt like a shame to see the grass marred in such a way, given the scarcity of natural grass on System Ground.

Shouts and squeals drew the delphox's eye towards the lake. Annie and her comrades leapt back and forth launching attacks at one another while Anchor and Matrix watched. Well, the ribombee wasn't

so much watching as messing with his computer. It seemed odd to see Annie engaged in such antics given they'd been watching her demolish a burger not thirty minutes earlier. Waveform sent a flurry of arrows towards the archeops. She leapt back to avoid them, narrowly dodging a punch from Trojan in the process as she struggled to find an opening to launch an attack of her own. Widget let out a repressed giggle, which would have betrayed his excitement if it weren't for his slowly wagging tail.

Tracer swallowed his current mouthful and cocked an eyebrow at the eevee. "You want to join them, don't you?"

"Oh, please!" Widget fixed him with a pleading gaze. "It's been ages since I've had a good scrap!"

The delphox sighed and said, "Very well," before taking another lick of his ice cream.

The eevee skipped along ahead of him, still wagging his tail, as he made a beeline for the sparring pokemon.

Matrix looked up as they arrived and twirled his antenna in his left paw. "Can we help you?"

Rather polite for a space pirate, Tracer thought. He gestured towards Annie and her friends.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Practicin'," said Anchor. "Once our Cap'n is out of hospital, we need to deal with a mutant mansion, so we can't exactly slack off."

"Yeah!" Annie cheered. "Shootin' down buildings! Bet they never taught you that in Pokemon School!"

She raised her wings in a flourish, bringing up a heap of shimmering fossilized rocks. They soared towards Waveform who ducked with such speed it took Tracer quite by surprise.

"Drat! I failed again!" she whined.

"It looked like a successful ancient power to me." When she didn't respond Tracer scratched his head in thought and turned to Anchor. "What is she trying to do exactly?"

"I can't relay that information," said the granbull.

"Why not?"

"It's confidential."

Widget skipped before Annie, tail wagging wildly. "Try it on me! Try it on me!"

"Are you kiddin' me?" she squeaked. "I can't hit a pupper!"

"Oh, come on!" he whined. "I can take an ancient power! I'm stronger than your average eevee. Smack me with some rocks!"

She sighed and shrugged her shoulders. "All right, fine. If you're that desperate."

She raised her wing, claws clasped in a fist. Something sparkled around her tiny wrist and instead of shimmering, ancient fossils, a huge slab materialised out of thin air. The massive disk looked like it had been freshly plucked from the earth as soil pattered down onto the ground from beneath it.

Widget fell to his haunches, his now motionless tail forming a brush. He fixed wide eyes on the humongous slab of rock as it rose into the air above his head. Then it stopped, hovering above him for the briefest of moments before it came crashing down with all the force of a falling continent.

Tracer dropped his cone as he stared aghast at the mound of rock and earth. There wasn't a single sign of the eevee in sight. Annie's expression mirrored his, except her eyes sparkled with glee.

She leapt into the air and cheered. "I did it! I did my Z-Move thingy!"

Tracer rushed towards the mound alongside Anchor, but before either of them could touch it the entire thing melted away like ice cream during a summer heat wave. Widget lay spread-eagled on his stomach, his eyes spinning in their sockets.

"Widget!" Tracer dropped down beside him and placed a paw on his shoulder. "Speak to me! Are you okay?"

"He seems okay," said Anchor. "Just a little dazed."

"What on earth was that?" the eevee muttered as he struggled to his feet. He shook out his fur, scattering dirt. "I've never felt anything like that before."

"I should think not," said Tracer. "What kind of move was that?"

"That's what I want to know!" Widget's eyes sparkled and a huge grin split his face. "That was freakin' awesome!"

Tracer blinked a few times. "Pardon?"

"I said it was awesome!" Widget skipped past him towards the archeops. "Do it again!"

"You're kidding right?" said Waveform. "That thing crushed you."

"Yeah, I know you said you wanted to get hit by rocks," said Trojan. "But this just borderlines on-"

"Do it again!" Widget rounded on Annie. "But this time, I wanna watch the whole thing from the non-squishing side of the attack."

Annie shrugged and spread her claws. "Sorry. Can't."

Widget's ears drooped and he let out a long, shrill 'Whaa?!'

"Ask me again in twelve hours." Annie twirled towards the bench and sat down. "It's someone else's turn now."

"Is that it?" Trojan scoffed. "We've trained for almost two weeks and that's it? I thought you'd be at least a little more celebratory."

Tracer looked from the squabbling lot to Anchor and Matrix. "I think this now warrants an explanation?"

Anchor sighed as he returned to his bench. "I suppose, given the circumstances."

"I think the circumstances have changed a tad," said Matrix without looking up.

"How so?" asked Anchor.

"Got these burning a hole in my belt." Matrix held up a pair of sparkling crystals in both paws.

Anchor took them in one and cocked an eyebrow at them, a thoughtful noise escaping his throat.

"What are those?" Something gnawed at Tracer's gut as he stared down at the crystals. One purple, one a dazzling white, and both of them holding a strange, black design. Both round, except the purple one's design looked like an eye.

"Z-Crystals," Anchor explained. He looked up briefly at the sparring pokemon. Widget leapt backwards, dodging punches thrown left and right by the scrafty. "I think you might wanna call over your buddy, delphox."

Tracer gave a sharp whistle and Widget stopped what he was doing. One nod towards the bench brought the eevee running.

"I think these are both for you two," said Anchor. "Psychinium-Z for… what's your name, detective?"

"Tracer," said the delphox. "And this hyperactive fox is Widget."

Widget stood on his hind paws with both front ones on the bench, craning to see into Anchor's paw. His nose twitched a mere centimetre or two from the crystals.

"These are what all those guys are wearing," he said.

"Exactly," said Anchor. "They allow you to use a Z-Move, like that continental crush dropped on your head."

"That… sounds… epic!" Widget panted.

"Shattered psyche," said Matrix.

The three pokemon turned their heads towards him.

Matrix twirled his antenna in one paw, fixing them all with one eye. "That's Psychium-Z's move. 'Shattered psyche'."

Anchor nodded and popped the Z-Crystal into Tracer's hesitant paw. No sooner had he taken hold of it, a band appeared around his right wrist. He let out a gasp and almost dropped the crystal to the floor.

"Yeah, that happens." Matrix looked back at his computer. "Normalium-Z allows the use of 'breakneck blitz'."

Widget took his crystal with much more excitement, using his teeth to place it into the bangle on his right fore-paw.

"That sounds super powerful!" he said. "How do I do that, then?"

"It takes practice," said Anchor. "Annie has been tryin' to use her move for the past two weeks."

"There's no sayin' I can't master it first try though, eh?" Widget sat down and grinned. "Teach me!"

Anchor sighed and leant forward on his knees. "I burned mine out over an hour ago. But you can watch what they're doin'."

Tracer sat down beside him, drawing his attention. "I'm more interested in how you got these."

"That's a long story," said Matrix.

"Nutshell it," said Widget.

"Okay. We got them from Solgaleo."

Tracer watched the ribombee, expecting more information, but his complete attention remained on his computer.

"No," said the delphox, "I think we need a little more of an explanation."

"Well, you did ask me to nutshell it," said Matrix.

Anchor rolled his eyes and turned towards Tracer. "We were headin' over the Dead Glacier. Solgaleo pulled us in. He'd called us the whole way there, actually. These aliens comin' into our world… it's all Socket's doin'. But she's been killed by her own creation. That mansion, it ain't natural. Her android BackDoor dragged a big alien through one of 'em porthole things he makes, named Distortion."

"He's a giratina," explained Matrix. "Apparently there's legends about them twisting worlds to their liking."

Widget craned his head around to look at Matrix. "Apparently there's legends of Solgaleo n'all."

"That's what Annie said when we told her and her friends," said Anchor. "She read books about him back in the human world. I've never heard of Z-Crystals, but the humans? They use them in their pokemon battles."

"Humans battle?" Widget gasped.

"With pokemon, aye. Apparently we're more like 'pets' in their world. That's the word she used. We don't talk or have jobs or fly ships or nothin'."

Tracer made a thoughtful noise and stroked his chin. "Given these aliens… I'm guessing Solgaleo isn't in our world then?"

"No idea," said Matrix. "But he sent me all the information on Z-Crystals so I could explain things to Annie while I was stuck on her ship. So he's certainly active in our world."

"I wouldn't be surprised if he appears in all worlds," said Anchor. "There's certainly more than one. These Z-Moves are to help us stop BackDoor. And BackDoor is currently up in the air in Socket's mutated mansion."

Widget chuckled, his tattoo creasing around his eye. "So we've gotta fight that thing? Bring it!"

Tracer narrowed his eyes at the eevee. "You're a little too excited about this."

Widget grinned and thumped the ground with his tail, then he returned to watching the sparring pokemon.

"So what happened to her mansion?" Tracer asked Anchor.

Anchor closed his eyes and leant back in his seat. "Now that one is a long story. But to cut it short, Distortion took over and Socket got sucked into some other world."

"So she's gone?!" Widget squeaked.

"Yup. And if BackDoor's description was anything to go by, she won't be comin' back either. At least not alive."

Tracer exchanged glances with Widget.

"So Socket's dead," said the delphox. "I never thought I'd see the end to her reign in my lifetime."

Widget shook his head and returned to watching the training session.

Waveform leapt into the air, unleashing a flurry of arrows. They exploded off the ground, sending up smoky tendrils that engulfed Trojan, dragging him towards the earth. The scrafty squealed as the ghostly smog engulfed him, then he let out a scream. The smog exploded, blowing him backwards until he landed on his bottom. The scrafty's face turned a deathly pale and he looked up at the decidueye as he slowly descended back to earth. He gave Trojan a nod of apology and gathered up his arrows.

"Well, that was 'never-ending nightmare'," said Matrix.

Widget trembled with glee. "I want a go!"

Anchor turned to Tracer and nodded towards the other pokemon. "So… given you've been gifted your own Z-Crystals, are you gonna train and help us out?"

Tracer scratched his cheek then stood up slowly. "I guess we've not got much choice."

"Seriously?" Widget fixed him with wide, surprised eyes. "You wanna do this?"

"System is in a dire state," said the delphox. "We currently have no mayor, and aliens are all over the place. Goodness knows what this Distortion is going to do."

"Well, that was a long and convoluted 'yes'," said Widget.

…

Web shuffled towards the hospital as fast as she could without appearing conspicuous. Poipole drifted along beside her, puffing

noisily on his makeshift breathing apparatus. Cyan City had wasted no time in kitting the small alien out with a toxic version of an oxygen tank, the breathing part fastened around the two smaller proboscis above his 'ears'. It made him look even more like an extraterrestrial investigating an alien world than his strange appearance already did.

The double doors swung wildly as Web scurried through them, making a beeline for the azumarill chatting to some unseen pokemon on a holoscreen. The skuntank rose up on her hind feet and placed her paws on the reception desk, drawing the receptionist's attention. The azumarill raised a claw as she swiftly wrapped up her query, then she turned fully to face Web.

"How can I help you?" the receptionist asked.

"We need to see… erm… Macro." The name was still alien to Web. "It's urgent."

The azumarill clicked her tongue as she browsed her computer screen. "He's in ward eleven."

Web muttered her thanks and scampered away towards the map, her keen eye spotting the assigned ward almost instantly. Two floors up. Well, she'd waited almost two weeks. A short elevator trip couldn't hold a candle to that.

Yet it seemed to take an eternity.

Poipole watched the numbers scroll with an avid fascination, humming to himself through his proboscis. Such a strange noise compared to his boyish telepathic voice that Web had grown used to. She watched the little Ultra Beast drift back and forth, examining everything his large eyes fell on. She couldn't deny she was going to miss him if everything went according to plan.

Finally the elevator pinged and allowed them out into a sterile corridor. Nomel and ammonia assaulted her senses as she dodged a yellow slip-hazard cone, and her muzzle creased as she tried not to

breathe it in. Despite her need to keep a clean home, the smell of such harsh cleaning chemicals made her feel like her poison typing was being stripped away.

Ward eleven rose up on her left as she slipped through into a new corridor. A private room. She nudged the door open with her head and muttered a polite 'hello?'

The mawile looked up from his bed. He sat back against a pillow, frowning at his mechanical paw. But when he spotted Web, the frown became a look of surprise. He swiftly regained himself and went back to examining his paw.

"Don't think I know you," he said. "You must be one of Annie's friends."

Web snorted and shook her head. "Why am I not surprised? I remember you."

"Really?" Macro's mechanical claws flexed and he looked up at her again. "You might need to jog my memory."

"Does the name Webber ring a bell?"

He shook his head slowly.

"We met over a game of Farkle," she said.

"I've played a lot of Farkle."

Web shook her head again and marched into the room with Poipole in tow. Macro's eye immediately went to the Ultra Beast and he scrambled back against his pillow. The small creature drifted over to him, tracing his trembling body with his large, playful eyes.

"Absolutely typical." She climbed up into a seat and folded her tail over her lap. "I'm still feeling the sting of that meeting and you don't even remember me."

"W-what did I do?" Macro squeaked, tugging his duvet up in a desperate bid to keep Poipole at bay.

"He won't hurt you," said Web. "It's him who wanted to see you actually. Not me."

Her words failed to relax the space pirate. He resorted to using a pillow to keep as much distance between himself and the playful Ultra Beast as possible.

"If you really can't remember," Web went on, "it was a casual game between myself, you and Anchor, and some machamp who really didn't like you. I left long before the game was over. Couldn't even afford to re-fuel my ship after that little stunt."

"So you bet everything and lost?" Macro's voice trembled as Poipole whisked the pillow aside. "Is that what this is? Some kinda sick revenge plan? Get your monster off me!"

He looked about to faint as Poipole grabbed his mechanical paw in both of his tiny, sticky ones. The Ultra Beast trailed a claw over the sparkling pink crystal then released him, drifting back slightly.

"So it's true," said Poipole, puffing noisily. "You really did meet Solgaleo."

Macro's jaw dropped and he stared at the Ultra Beast, aghast. "I… I'm hearing its voice in my head. How am I hearing its voice in my head?"

"That's how he talks," said Web. "We all hear it."

Poipole stared back at Macro silently, looking between the mawile and the pink crystal.

Macro narrowed his eyes at the Ultra Beast. "How do you know Solgaleo gave me this?"

"He gave my world Z-Crystals," Poipole explained. "I use one but… my trainer has it."

"Trainer?"

Poipole drifted backwards towards Web, landing gracefully on her lap. She kept her eyes on Macro as she gently stroked the creature's bulbous head.

"Back in Poipole's world," she began, "the Ultra Beasts depend on humans to look after them."

Macro let out a very confused "Eh?"

"In answer to your other question," said Web, "no. This isn't some revenge plan. I've moved on, I've married. If it weren't for that crazy game, I probably would never have even met Trojan. I'm here because this little guy thinks he might be able to help you."

Macro's eye snapped towards the Ultra Beast. "You? Help how?"

"That mansion is being controlled by a monster," Poipole explained. "You need an army. Your army is too small. But there are lots of us."

Macro's mouth opened and closed as he tried to make sense of the poipole's words.

"That mansion has the porthole thing," said Poipole. "It can open the door home. We destroy the monster, we can take the porthole thing and go home. All Ultra Beasts should be able to defeat the monster if we work together."

"Hang on." Macro raised his paws. "Are you suggesting we work with those other Ultra Beasts? Those city destroying kartana? The things that almost killed me?!"

The room fell into silence, broken only by Poipole's noisy breathing. Web trailed her paw over his head, keeping her eyes on Macro.

"I'm slowly dying every day I live in Spool City," she said. "And I'm happy to work with you in order to bring about a greater good."

Macro frowned at her. "Wait a minute… you blame me for that? I thought you said you'd moved on!"

"I may have moved on, but that doesn't mean I'm happy with you." Web shrugged her shoulders. "You didn't need to take everything. I asked… I even begged. You told me it was the rules and sent me on my way. If it weren't for Waveform landing on my doorstep, I wouldn't even be able to afford to live there. I'd be scavenging from trash cans like the trubbish that fill our streets." She paused and narrowed her eyes. "I know you cheated in that game, with your trick dice, but I didn't even say anything."

Macro couldn't even look at her. He stared down at his paws, occasionally glancing towards the window.

"Just like these Ultra Beasts," she said, "I'm living in a city that's toxic even to me. They're not meant to be here, Macro. They don't understand. But Poipole? He can talk to them. Help them to see we're willing to help them get back home! There's hundreds of them. But there's only one Distortion, and only one BackDoor."

"Loads of pokemon died escaping that mansion." Macro spoke through clenched teeth, his organic paw balled into a tight fist. "If we couldn't fight it then…"

"You didn't use your Z-Power," said Poipole. "None of you did. And you didn't have us. You didn't have a plan."

Macro looked back at Poipole. "And what's your plan exactly?"

"Get all Ultra Beasts together. Explain. And pool all our power into fighting Distortion and BackDoor. All we need to do is analyze our strengths and weaknesses. I can poison things, and make things sticky. Kartana can cut through steel. Celesteela can fire many elemental attacks from its cannons. It is also strong and can fly, so it

could carry those that can't. I've not met all the different Ultra Beasts that live in my world, my trainer tends to stay in one place, so some might have strengths I don't even know of."

Macro had turned pale under his fur. He stuttered over his words and glanced towards the door.

"I'd take his plan into consideration," said Web. "Because I think it's the best you're going to get."

The space pirate took a steadying breath and brushed his long black fur from his eyes. "We are meant to get them all back home. So… maybe you're right. Maybe it is the best idea. I mean… I'd never considered reasoning with them. I didn't even know it was possible. None of us did. Switch wanted to burn the kartana to cinders."

Poipole trembled from proboscis to tail. "Kill them? Killing them is not an option."

"No… I know it's not." Macro hugged himself and stared out of the window. "Sadly they don't see us in the same way."

"That's why we need to talk to them," said Poipole. "Right now, they think you are a threat, just like you think they are a threat. They're just defending themselves."

Macro nodded stiffly but said nothing.

Web pushed herself from her seat with a sigh, letting Poipole drift into the air.

"I'm glad you see things our way," she said. "We can discuss it some more when you're up and about."

Macro didn't look up as she made her way towards the door. But his voice froze her as her paw fastened over the handle.

"Webber?"

She looked back at him over her shoulder, but he wouldn't meet her eye.

"I just wanna say I'm sorry," he said. "I'm a different 'mon now, and I don't like the way I used to be. If there's anything I can do-"

"Get these Ultra Beasts home," she said. "This world isn't good for them, and I want them all to get back home safely, and for this little creature to get back to his human friend. That's all I ask."

She tugged the door open and slipped back out into the hallway, feeling a lot lighter.

…

Seed City erupted into chaos. Fairy types scattered as they fled from the descending mansion. Purple flames shot from it like rockets, washing harmlessly over the fleeing pokemon. But everything else it touched exploded into rubble. Harmful rubble that rained down and crushed tiny bodies, knocked victims off their feet, and fell like a barrier between terrified families.

Then the mansion landed. Purple tendrils shot into the earth and erupted back up again several feet away. One slight brush from the tendrils brought buildings down in a cloud of dust. Before the dust even had a chance to settle, the tendrils began to pulse. The rubble rose into the air and reformed. The ground around it warped and twisted as it was dragged from the floor to join the hodge-podge jigsaw of brick, stone and iron.

The ground rumbled as yet more probing limbs stretched through the earth, spreading the purple light across the entirety of Seed City. Buildings warped and twisted into corkscrews and more sections of the ground split to rise into the sky at random angles. Suddenly there was no sense of gravity. Wherever there was ground, things clung to it effortlessly. But as for reality, the very essence vanished. The Seed City System had come to know and love vanished in an instant. A wasteland of chaos and despair.

'Perfect!' The deep voice shook the air. 'From here, all of System, and the worlds that surround it, will be mine!'

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 72

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Seventy Two

The door to the ward flew open and Macro dropped the ball he'd been holding. It fell from his mechanical paw onto his lap, then rolled onto the floor. It finally came to a stop at Jumper's feet. The frogadier stepped around it and held out his computer to Macro.

"We've got a clearer picture," he said. "I thought you'd want to see it."

Macro took the computer in his organic paw and frowned down at it. It wasn't much clearer than the other pictures he'd seen. Over the past five days he'd been handed photo after photo and it was always the same. Seed City, covered in a dome of purple fire. What he could see of the city was as much a blur as the previous photos had hinted at. Buildings twisted like corkscrews. Ground pulled up to form seamless walls dotted with ruins. Some of those 'walls' were littered around the dome, allowing a clearer perspective into the ongoings inside what pokemon were calling 'The Warped Zone'.

One thing was for certain, however.

"It's spreading." The words left Macro's mouth before he'd even finished thinking about them.

"I fear it is," said Jumper. "Unfortunately no one can get close enough to even take a decent picture, let alone deal with it."

Macro handed the computer back and met Jumper's eye. "Why do I feel like you're going to ask me to stay away from it?"

Jumper sighed and tucked the computer away, but not before giving the photo one last, scornful look. "Because you know I'm worried

about you?"

"I'm fine."

Jumper's eye went to the mechanical paw. "Just because you survived your last run-in with this entity-"

"Look, Gov." Macro lifted his paws to silence him. "I'm goin'. I've got a job to do."

"You're a braver 'mon than I, Macro."

"Hey, I won't lie," said Macro. "I'm absolutely terrified. But someone's gotta stop it, and I'm not alone. I've got my crew, along with Annie and a load of other 'mon."

He pushed himself up slowly and retrieved the ball before reaching for his scarf. A black one, washed and pressed by DL. The one Switch had bought him had been reduced to tatters.

"Where are you going?" Jumper asked.

"Lunch. I've got a date."

"Ahh, with DL I imagine?" The frogadier smirked.

"No, actually." Macro handed him the ball and moved past him. "This one's with Time Archeops."

Jumper's jaw dropped and he watched him leave the room before scampering after him. "So you actually have a plan?"

"It ain't my plan," Macro explained. "Webber came to me with some crazy idea and I've been stewin' over it for days. Finally decided to pull myself together and get the ball rollin'."

"I have to say, I'm pretty curious."

"I wish I were. Instead, I'm terrified. It involves those Ultra Beasts."

Jumper stuttered and his eyes almost bugged from his head.

Macro chuckled and waved him off as he turned towards the elevator. "Exactly. Now you know how I feel inside." He tapped a mechanical claw to his temple.

Jumper sighed heavily and nodded to the doors. "This one's on you, I'm afraid. I think I'll take the stairs."

Macro watched him leave then climbed into the elevator. Once the doors opened again, he turned to his left to head into the cafeteria. Annie and her crew sat around a large table beside the window overlooking the garden. The horsea fountain gurgled away, spraying water from its nose into the pool around it. Given the window was open, the noise was audible over the voices of the cafe's few occupants.

Poipole sat beside Webber, clutching a small cake in both tiny paws. He froze and looked up as Macro pulled up a seat beside him. Annie stared back at the mawile, her claws folded neatly before her. It took a moment for him to realise she was imitating Waveform, faking a stoic expression. It melted away when she spotted Macro's paw and she scrambled across the table to grope for it.

Waveform grabbed her by the scruff and dragged her back into her seat. "Manners."

"I just wanna look," she whined.

"Look with your eyes." Waveform turned his attention onto Macro and nodded. "Good to see you're getting the hang of that paw."

Macro clutched his real one over it as he began to grow rather self conscious, but the warmth from the Z-Crystal placated him before it really kicked in.

"Yeah, it's fine," he said. "But that's not why I'm here. Webber suggested something to me a few days ago and I really think, if it's

gonna work, we need to get things movin'."

"She told me the same thing." Annie spread her claws. "I agree. That Distortion fellow isn't goin' anywhere so we've gotta make him."

"To put it bluntly, yes," said Webber.

"I could put it blunter," muttered Trojan.

Macro looked about the table and grunted. "Hang on. Aren't there meant to be six of you guys? Where's the goldeen?"

"Having treatment," said Web. "Jumper was quite concerned about his stitches. He's been taking sitrus pills and basking in medical water for the past week. But he should be fine to leave with us when we're ready to go."

"He'll just up and leave anyway," said Annie. "That's our Zip! Always eager to help! Although… he's pretty gutted he's missin' this meeting."

"Which really should be under way," said Trojan. "So… Ultra Beasts. They seem pretty dangerous, so how do we recruit them without getting ourselves killed?"

"We smack them with Z-Moves!" Annie grinned.

"No," said Macro. "You don't. You do not harm the Ultra Beasts, understood?"

Annie pouted and folded her wings. "Fine. But trainers weaken pokemon in my world before we catch 'em! Same thing 'n' all that jazz."

"That's not how it works in my world," said Poipole. "But Ultra Beasts can communicate with one another just like we're doing now. So you're best bet is to establish an alliance through me."

Despite him still munching away at his cake, his mental voice sounded perfectly clear and unobstructed. It made Macro fell rather uneasy.

"I still think it won't work," said Trojan. "Does anyone have a better idea?"

"Z-Moves," said Annie.

Macro clenched his teeth together. "Here's an idea. How about savin' them for Distortion, eh?"

"I'll talk to them," Poipole went on, ignoring Annie and Macro. "If we start with those Ultra Beasts I'm more familiar with, we'll have a better chance of recruiting them."

"How so?" Annie leant towards him until her nose was almost touching his.

The little Ultra Beast backed away slightly, puffing noisily on his toxic tank. "Because if I were to approach one more alien to me - one that might never have met a poipole - they might see me as a threat. Like he did." He nodded towards Macro.

"He's got a point," said the mawile. "If those kartana attacked me because they saw me as a threat, then this little goop ball doesn't stand much chance, does he?"

Trojan scoffed. "From what I heard, he put up a better fight than you!"

"Oi!" Macro flashed a canine at the scrafty. "If we're all gonna get along in this little partnership, there has to be less snarkiness."

The two pokemon glared across the table at each other and Trojan balled his paws into tight fists. Web narrowed her eyes at him and he backed down, sinking into his seat and muttering to himself.

"I think we should start with the celesteela," said Poipole. "That way, we have a strong ally when we approach the kartana. After that, we'll recruit them as we find them."

Macro shuddered at the thought of the two Ultra Beast species. The screaming celesteela and the sharp, deadly kartana… would they really work alongside pokemon to stop Distortion and BackDoor? He shook it off and leant forward on his elbows.

"Might I suggest," he said slowly, "that after you get those two, you go for the xurkitree in Meta City? If they're still there, at least."

"Why?" Annie asked around a mouth full of cake.

"Because they're closer," said Macro. "If you scatter about going too and fro all over System then it will take forever to get them all."

"Scatter about…" Trojan parroted.

"Pardon?" Macro looked up at him.

"It's a good point," said Trojan. "If we break up, we'll cover more ground."

Macro pointed a claw at Poipole. "But you need him!"

"After we've got the others!" said Trojan. "Split us up. Take some of the beasts. Go and recruit more beasts. Split up. Find them. Recruit them. And so on and so forth."

"That's a fantastic idea!" Web beamed from ear to ear. "If the Ultra Beasts split up and hunt down more as well, then it will speed things up a lot!"

"And we've got our Z-Moves if they prove to be stubborn!" Annie cheered.

Macro and Poipole leant towards her. "You don't use your Z-Moves on the Ultra Beasts!" they roared.

Annie blinked a few times and fell back in her seat, looking between Poipole and the space pirate.

"Okay," she squeaked.

"I think it would be a good idea if we went on ahead," Web told Macro. "We can take our ship to Pulse City and recruit the celesteela there while you finish recovering."

Macro nibbled on a claw as he mulled this over. It certainly seemed like a good idea, and he wouldn't have to face the celesteela… although if it didn't agree to their terms…

No, they would be fine. They were strong pokemon, and Poipole knew more about it than any of them.

He nodded and turned to Web. "That sounds like a plan. How long do you need?"

"How far is Pulse City?" Poipole asked, still munching on his cake.

"About a half-day's flight in my ship," said Macro. "I dunno about your pyukumyuku, though."

"Yours has hyper drive, right?" asked Trojan.

"Yes, it does." Macro narrowed his eyes, speaking slowly as he dreaded the scrafty's next question.

"Then if we use your ship," said Trojan, "we could do it in less than a day, and still be back here before dawn tomorrow."

With a celesteela in tow. Macro swallowed audibly and glanced to the window.

"Look, if you're worried about us wreckin' your ship, it ain't gonna happen," said Trojan. "I tend to be a bit ship proud, which surprised me actually."

"Yeah!" Annie leaned forward all too keenly. "If any harm comes to your ship, it wont be from our claws! It'll be from that 'steela thing."

Macro grew a little faint. He sank back in his seat, trying not to stare at the archeops.

"Fine," he muttered. "You can use my ship. But on one condition!"

Annie inclined her reptilian head on one side. "And what's that?"

"You take Anchor."

She blinked. "Why do you want me to take an anchor?"

…

Trojan marched on ahead of Annie and her crew, his paws tucked behind his head and each step a hefty stomp.

"Lends me his ship and doesn't even trust me to drive the jackin' thing," he muttered.

Anchor glanced at Annie and cleared his throat. "You sure this is really okay?"

"Yeah!" she waved a dismissive wing. "Macro leant us his ship, you heard it from the horse's mouth."

"Horse?" Anchor's muzzle creased and he raised an eyebrow.

"It's a metaphor," said Annie. "Besides! This is gonna be fun! We'll fly off to Pulse City and catch us a celesteela!" She paused and twirled to face him. "Got any pokeballs?"

Anchor's jaw went slack and he shook his head slowly. "Pokeballs?"

She waved a wing again and continued marching towards the docks. "Guess it's just a human thing then. We'll have to catch it in a big net."

"We won't need a net," said Poipole. "Once it understands, it should come with us freely just like I'm doing now."

"Except it's the size of a freakin' city," said Anchor. "Where are we gonna put it?"

"It's only thirty feet tall," said Poipole.

"Yeah, how small are your cities?" asked Annie.

Anchor sank slightly. "All right, fine. I exaggerated. But still, thirty feet ain't exactly somethin' to scoff at. We're like joltiks to that thing."

Annie cocked an eyebrow. "What's a joltik?"

Anchor paused beside Wildcard Gamma and gave Annie a confused shake of the head. He said nothing as he opened the door and nodded for them to climb on board. A little buzz reached his ears and he looked up to see Matrix vanishing into the cockpit.

"Oi!" Anchor scrambled on before Waveform, eliciting a startled hoot. The granbull skidded into the cockpit. "Matrix, what do you think you're doin'?"

The ribombee looked up from the navigation deck. "Navigating."

"Did Macro tell you to navigate?" Anchor growled.

Matrix shrugged and twisted back to the deck, keying in the co-ordinates for Pulse City. "You need one, so here I am. Pulse City all keyed in."

"Leave him?" Annie flopped into Macro's chair and kicked her talons up on the dashboard. "Ooh, you've got seat belts!"

Anchor sighed and moved towards his seat. He had to shoo Trojan from it, much to the scrafty's displeasure.

"Somehow, I feel like this ain't gonna go well," muttered the granbull.

"What was that?" Annie fixed one eye on him.

"Nothin'. Just silently scoldin' my captain for this crazy idea."

"It were Web's crazy idea," said Annie.

"Aye, and where is she right now?"

"Lettin' Zip know were leavin' on a short trip."

"That ain't gonna go down well," said Trojan. "But I guess it's a good thing he ain't comin'. This ship ain't got locks for his feet, and I doubt Hunter's gonna want water spillin' all over his ship."

"He doesn't go by Hunter anymore," said Anchor. "He's Macro to anyone who listens."

"Sorry, but I ain't used to that."

"Well, get used to it," said Anchor. "He hates that old alias. And now Socket's outta the picture, Hunter's definitely gone."

Trojan snorted and cast his eyes around the cockpit. "Only three chairs, eh? Where do you expect us all to park our tails?"

"I dunno, kitchen?" Anchor nodded towards the cockpit door. "Cookie will probably appreciate the company and cook you up some nice pancakes."

"Ooh!" Annie flew from her seat and darted for the kitchen, grabbing Waveform by the wing and dragging the startled decidueye after her.

Anchor nodded to Trojan and waved a paw to the now vacant seat. "There you go, problem solved."

Web clattered onto the ship and glanced towards the kitchen as she entered the cockpit. A small smile played at her lips and she settled herself down in the middle of the room.

"A bit lax on seats in here, huh?" she said.

"This ship were designed for a crew of three," said Anchor. "A crew of three plus our chef, and he spends all his time in the kitchen if he ain't sleepin'." He looked over at Web as the ship flared to life. "How's the little goldeen?"

"Zip? He's fine," said Web. "Just a little sad he can't come with us. I think he's had enough of the hospital now."

"So he'll make a full recovery then?"

The schooling wishiwashi left the docks, turning slowly towards Pulse City. When Web didn't answer, Anchor looked back at her.

"I'm not sure," she said quietly. "They've not done medical work on a fish pokemon before."

"You kiddin' me?" Trojan scoffed before Anchor could respond. "It's a city full of water types! And they're mostly vegan!"

Web looked up at him. "It's not Cyan City at fault, dear. It's the bigwigs in the medical industry. If medicine isn't created for use on a fish, then it doesn't exist. What Cyan City is doing is very experimental."

Somehow that didn't bode well.

Wildcard Gamma was a safe enough distance from Cyan City for a quick hyperdrive burst. Anchor called to the cockpit to brace themselves before pushing it into hyperdrive. Web's claws dragged across the floor as she fought to stay in place, crouching low to the ground. A 'whoop!' came from the kitchen followed by a clatter, splashes and a distressed squeal from the ship's chef. Anchor grimaced at the mental image of a sticky archeops sprawled over the remains of Cookie's lunch menu.

The granbull shook his head slowly. Hyperdrive or not, this was going to be a long journey.

…

Macro strolled down the corridor towards the rehabilitation ward. DL was already there, chatting to Jumper and one of the doctors. The male dewott tapped at the computer's touch-screen keypad, their conversation long under way before the mawile had even had chance to tear himself away from Annie and her crew.

He pushed his way through the door, violet eyes scanning over the various chambers adorning the wall. The room was massive, and each chamber sported a bug pokemon. The rooms they occupied were three times their length in width and depth, but Macro still felt they were too small. In the corner, back to the wall, sat Switch in his human form. He'd seen him before, but not in this ward. His eyes were as empty as the previous time, and it made Macro feel hollow inside.

"Any joy?" he croaked as he joined Jumper's side.

"None," said Jumper. "And it's somewhat ironic… given Switch was one of the researchers behind this issue with the bug pokemon."

"I want to know how Luma City got hold of the technology," said DL, "because Socket didn't hand it out."

"Hackers," said Macro. "Or someone who worked for her sold it."

"Either way, it doesn't help us," said the dewott. "What we need are the raw files his memories are on."

"I already told you," Macro said through clenched teeth, "they're either deleted or stored on the computer Socket's crony used. And if it's the latter, that's currently holed up in a possessed mansion. And we can't be sure the computer wasn't destroyed in all that chaos!"

Jumper nodded slowly and leant against the wall. "It leaves us in a rather… dire situation."

"Us? What about him?" Macro waved a paw at Switch. "He's out of his own world, Gov, and he's gotta go back like this! Who knows how that will affect the time-line? His life? It were almost a thousand years ago, they won't have this kind of technology!"

DL looked up at Macro, her eyes wet with tears. "There's nothing we can do right now."

"No…" Macro slumped against the wall beside Jumper and folded his arms. "I suppose there ain't."

"Just like the bugs, we can teach him to be a living being," said the dewott, "but we can't teach him about who he is. Not without extensive research dating back to his childhood years."

"Even System wouldn't have that," said Jumper. "I'm under the impression he was an adult when he arrived."

Macro bit his lip as his eye drifted to the human. Switch hunched forward with an arm hanging over one knee, staring blankly at the door. Macro hadn't even tried speaking to him. He'd been told it was pointless, and to focus on recovery.

"Maybe it's like amnesia?" he suggested.

"What do you mean?" the dewott asked.

"Well, you don't have any of these bug types' families, do you?" Macro shrugged. "We don't even know if they were hatched normally. These bugs could've been lab grown for all we know. So… what if someone Switch knows were to talk to him? It might help jog some memories."

"He has none," said Jumper. "We've quizzed him-"

"Who's to say everything's been taken?" Macro asked. "It might be a long shot, but I suggest we try! System needs him, and not just to chase off some monster building!"

DL looked up at Jumper and pawed at her ear. "He has a point. It's worth a shot."

"Would it have worked on you?" Jumper asked.

DL shrugged her shoulders and huddled into herself. "I don't know. There's no one from my childhood…" She trailed off, her eyes going distant and watery.

It ate Macro up inside. He shook his head and let out a slow sigh. "Just give me a shot, doc."

The dewott waved a paw. "Go ahead. Try."

Macro kicked back from the wall and approached the human. Seeing him sat like that caused a lump to rise in Macro's throat. He froze part way and glanced back over his shoulder.

"I think I'd rather you weren't hangin' around," he told the dewott.

"I'm the doctor," the dewott protested.

"So? I think the results would be pretty clear after, eh?"

The dewott sighed and grabbed his Clipboard, then he strutted from the room. Jumper wasn't far behind him. He paused by the door and gave Macro a pointed look.

"I hope you know what you're doing," he said.

Macro shrugged his shoulders. "Would you?"

The door closed behind them, leaving just Macro and DL alone with the human. Macro's claws twitched as he braced himself to approach Switch, unsure of what to say or do.

DL's meek voice reached him from beside the computer. "Do you want me to leave?"

Macro thought about it for a moment, straining to push the lump back down his throat. "No."

DL gave a quiet 'okay' as she huddled into the computer chair.

Macro gave himself a mental shake and pushed himself on until he was close enough to place a paw on Switch's arm. Nothing. He reached behind his head and flicked the switch. The human stretched languidly and his blank eyes flitted to the mawile's.

"Are you Socket?" he asked.

It already felt dire.

"Switch?" Macro said quietly. "Remember me?"

"My name is Download Database," said Switch. "I am programmed only to serve Socket."

That lump shot straight back up into Macro's throat, strangling his voice.

"No you're not!" he whined. "You're a human! You ain't some computer! You have a life, a family! Remember?"

"Family is irrelevant. I am just a database. Please shut me off. The first pokemon I see must be Socket."

"No! I'm not gonna turn you off like some computer! You're my friend!" Macro dug his claws into Switch's arm, causing a visible wince. "See? You feel! You're not just some computer! Search that database of yours and see if you can find who you really are tucked away in some little void!"

Switch's eyes went distant for a brief moment, then fixed back on Macro. "No such information. Please switch me off. The first

Pokemon I see must be Socket."

Macro bit his lip so hard he tasted blood. His eyes filled with tears and he slumped forward, burying his face into Switch's sleeve.

"Please…" Macro sobbed. "Say something snarky. Make a joke. Tell me I'm a jerk. Sass me! Wink!"

Switch said nothing. Macro felt him shift, but when he looked back up Switch was just staring back at the door. Eyes empty. Tears flowed freely from Macro's eyes and he huddled into the human's arm.

DL's soft paw grabbed his shoulder and pulled him towards her. He released Switch and looped his arms around her neck, sobbing into her fur.

"I've failed him," he said. "I was meant to get him home…"

She hugged him tightly and trailed a paw over his back. "You've not failed him."

"I have! I let this happen…"

"No. You didn't." DL's voice sounded thick with tears. "It's not your fault, please understand that."

He shook his head, choking back a sob. Part of him knew she was right, but he couldn't help but blame himself. Even if he hadn't personally failed him, it sure felt like it.

…

To say Pulse City had seen better days would have been an understatement.

The air was close to freezing as a breeze blew through the shattered dome. Frost peppered the ruined walls and froze moisture into slippery patches over the tarmac. Green vines grew up through the

cracked floor, glinting with frosty dewdrops like an adornment of pearls. It would have been a pretty sight if they weren't penetrating walls and squeezing rubble, reducing the former city to ruins. Buildings lay in tatters, bricks and mortar strewn about the apocalyptic wasteland. Neon boards flickered erratically as they strained to clutch on to what precious electricity remained to fuel them. The only sounds came from the distorted mechanical voices that had advertised former entertainment arcades, and the occasional grunt from a small, green sewaddle as he strained to lift a stone slab with his head.

"Need a paw there, Worm?" Anchor came to a stop at his side.

Worm looked around with a squeak, dropping the stone slab back in place. A pained yelp came from deep within it, washing away Worm's surprise with a look of remorse.

"Is there someone under there?!" Anchor barked.

"Keep your voice down!" Worm hissed.

Anchor froze and glanced around at the vines. One or two twitched, causing the rubble they encased to crumble, trickling powdery residue onto the tarmac.

The sewaddle frowned up at the granbull before returning to his task. "You should know better than to sneak up on a pirate in a place like this!"

Anchor looked around at the wasteland and shrugged. "I ain't never seen a place like this."

Worm said nothing, grunting as he craned out his neck to lift the stone slab. With a final jump, the slab pivoted on its edge and fell backwards onto the street with an almighty clatter. What had lay beneath it was a black and yellow striped leg. Anchor shook himself and leapt to the bug pokemon's aide, hoisting a large rock from its captive.

"It's been like this for weeks," Worm explained. "This fellow was tryin' to rebuild this apartment so those of us stuck here have somewhere to stay, but the wall caved in."

Anchor froze, holding up the large rock with one paw. "Why are you stayin' here?"

"Ships got wrecked," said Worm. "And no one's comin' here to save us, so we thought we'd make do. That giant fellow is happy enough now its roots have set in. We just gotta learn to live with it, haven't we?"

Anchor tossed the rock beyond the rubble and reached for another, larger slab pressing on its victim's torso. "How many of you are left here?"

"About a hundred or so," Worm explained. "We've been livin' in the black market, but it ain't home. We decided we aught to just make do and try to live alongside our new 'friend'. I mean, it ain't that bad so long as you keep your distance. Those that get too close get whacked by one of its cannons. Eek!"

Worm curled into a ball, his wide, black eyes fixed on Poipole. The alien drifted from side to side, examining the rubble curiously.

"Is someone stuck there?" Poipole asked in his telepathic voice.

Worm uncurled, fixing the Ultra Beast with a look of confused terror.

"Don't worry yourself, Worm," said Anchor. "This here is Poipole. He's a friend."

"F-f-friend?!" Worm squeaked. "Like that vine-cannon-monster?"

"Celesteela," Poipole corrected.

"I beg your pardon?" Worm rose to his feet and gave Poipole an accusatory glare.

"That's the creature's name," Poipole explained. "Celesteela."

"It has a name?!"

"She."

Worm blinked in bewilderment, but Poipole turned his attention to Anchor.

"Once you've freed your friend," said Poipole, "I have something I need to show you."

"Hang on!" Worm clambered onto the rubble, oblivious to the trapped Pokemon's protests, so he could look Poipole in the eye. "I think you need to explain a little more. How much do you know about this creature that destroyed my home?!"

"Her destruction of your home was not an act of malice," said Poipole. "As for why she hits you if you get too close… that is because you are climbing into her nest."

Worm stuttered, blinking rapidly. "Nest?"

Anchor scooped up the stunned sewaddle, setting him back onto the road. Then he lifted the last of the largest rocks from the trapped pokemon. The smaller ones fell away as an electabuzz pushed himself up so he was sitting. Anchor grabbed his paw in both of his and hoisted him to his feet. The electabuzz grunted with the effort and clutched a paw to his chest. The other paw hung limply at his side, useless.

"Think that cracked a few ribs," he gasped.

"You got a medic?" Anchor asked.

The electabuzz shook his head. "Not as such, no."

"Then I'll send you to my ship. Our chef knows a thing or two about first aid. He'll fix that arm in a splint and check your ribs while he's at

it."

Poipole's large, purple face popped up between Anchor and the electabuzz. "I must show you something quick."

"What's the hurry?" Anchor asked. "This 'mon needs help."

"Annie knows scotch about patience."

"Oh, that." The granbull nodded his understanding and turned to Worm. "Show your friend to our ship and let Cookie know what the problem is."

"You're gonna allow strange pirates onto your ship?" Worm scoffed.

"Time of need, Worm," said Anchor. "Besides, you can't fly it and your friend's only got one workin' arm. Matrix and Cookie would be more of a match for either of you."

Worm shook his head. "Forget it. I'm not interested in your ship. I wanna know what the deal is with this monster."

"Celesteela is not a monster," said Poipole. "They're usually quite placid."

Worm spat the word 'placid' as though it were poison.

"If you wanna come along, fine." Anchor nodded to the electabuzz. "But he needs help gettin' to our ship."

"I'll be fine," said the electabuzz. "I wouldn't mind knowing what's goin' on either."

Anchor watched the electric pokemon flinch as he staggered around the mound of rubble.

The granbull shook his head and waved a dismissive paw. "Suit yourself. Can't say I blame you, I'd be curious n'all. Lead the way, Poipole."

The purple Ultra Beast did a somersault and took off ahead of them at the speed of knot. Anchor had to trot to keep up, leaving a protesting Worm and limping electabuzz to follow after him. Part of the granbull hoped desperately they'd give up and go to his ship. Poipole didn't have to lead them far, however. They reached the back alley of Moonlight Lounge, where Annie was crouching beside Web. The archeops stared intensely at a tangle of tiny, slender vines growing beside a drain.

Anchor joined her side and followed her gaze. "What are we lookin' at?"

"This." Annie pointed a claw at a small, sharp thorn. "Cute ain't it?"

Anchor ducked closer, unsure as to why a thorn would be thought of as cute. Then he spotted it. A tiny face in a tiny bamboo protrusion at the pinnacle of the thorn. His jaw dropped.

"A hatchling?!" he squeaked.

Worm stopped beside him, gasping for breath. He was about to berate the granbull when he spotted what all the fuss was about. His jaw almost hit the floor and his cry of despair rose into the air.

Anchor snapped his head around and hissed at the sewaddle to shut up. Once the echo had faded, the vines began to shift. The tiny celesteela opened its mouth and let out a shrill scream.

"Oh good job, bug!" Annie snapped. "You've only gone and woke it!" She turned back to the baby Ultra Beast. "Hush now, little'un. Go back to sle-"

A deep, eerie scream filled the city. Annie leapt to her feet, stepping back from the baby. The larger vines surrounding it shifted, sending rubble raining down from what was left of the tall apartment blocks. The celesteela's bamboo face rose above them, searching the streets with its tiny eyes.

"Oh great, now we gotta book it!" Annie turned to flee, but Web grabbed her by the scruff. She turned her neck to raise an eyebrow at the skuntank. "Whatcha doin'?"

"We can't just leave!" said Web. "We've got a job to do!"

Annie pointed at Poipole as he shot up towards the celesteela's face. "Yeah, and he's doin' it. Let's go."

She snatched herself free and ran towards the main road. Waveform and Trojan rounded the corner, the latter almost colliding with the archeops. He steadied himself by placing his paws on Annie's shoulders.

"There's gotta be hundreds of them!" he gasped at Web. "All over the city, growin' on them vines!"

The screams reached a deafening crescendo. Amongst the chaos, Anchor could pick out shrill, child-like cries. The celesteela raised a cannon, aiming it into the back alley. The opening lit up red, and even at such a distance they could feel the intense heat radiating from it.

"Celesteela, stop!" Poipole screamed, waving his tiny arms before her face. "You have to listen to me!"

The massive Ultra Beast's tiny eyes fixed on him briefly before going once again to the space pirates.

"They are no threat to you or your children!" Poipole went on. "But there is a threat out there, and we need your help!"

The cannon froze, still aimed at the space pirates, still radiating a threatening heat.

"Please, listen to me!" said Poipole. "These are not your enemies! They want to send you home, to send all of us home. But they can't because of The Altered One!"

The red heat from the cannon vanished, washed away immediately by the frosty breeze. Celesteela's eyes went back to Poipole. Wide, alarmed, and prompting an explanation. Slightly threatening. A low wail came from deep within her throat, chilling the space pirates to the core.

"I'm telling the truth," said Poipole. "He's taken over a mansion in this world, and has destroyed a city to control it. His control will spread throughout System if we don't stop him, and then we'll never get back home. Never get back to our trainers."

Celesteela shook her head slowly.

"You might not have a trainer," Poipole went on, "but surely you want to go home? To raise your babies somewhere safe… and warm?"

Celesteela looked back down at the alley. The small thorn-like children had stopped screaming. The one beside Annie's feet had begun to snore. The Ultra Beast turned her attention back to Poipole and gave a curt nod. A brief silence passed between them, then Celesteela broke it. With a long, shrill screech. The purple Ultra Beast wasn't remotely afraid. He shot back down towards his friends and hovered before them.

"She'll help," he said. "But first she needs to make sure her children are okay."

"All right," said Anchor. "How long do they take to grow up?"

"That's not what she meant."

The celesteela's eyes were fixed on the space pirates. A deep gnawing feeling spread through Anchor's gut.

"What does she want?" he rumbled.

"Someone needs to care for them." Poipole turned to Worm. "I heard you say there were about a hundred of you living here?"

Worm blinked at the Ultra Beast and shuffled his feet on the ground. "Why do I have the horrible, gut-wrenching feeling you're gonna ask me to baby sit?"

…

I'm not gonna lie. This arc has some very fun and silly moments. I loved writing the Ultra Beasts being so… alien and quirky. Please R&R! =D

Chapter 73

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Seventy Three

Macro refused to leave the lab. He sat watching the motionless human who, after having his requests ignored, had opted to switch himself off. Macro had been sat in silence for so long he'd almost forgotten DL was still with him. She'd returned to the computer chair, idly tapping away at the doctor's keyboard. The soft clicking drew him out of his thoughts and he sat back on his paws. A hefty sigh left his chest, drawing DL's perusing to a slow halt.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

Macro shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Lousy."

"Well… I think I might have discovered something to lift your spirits."

He craned his neck around to look at her. She didn't meet his eye, instead looking past him at Switch while pawing her ear.

"I've had a search through my own files." She tapped her head then returned to her ear-pawing. "And all biological functions are kept in the brain, not fed through the computer itself. That means that they didn't remove everything from my mind."

Macro sighed and glanced back at the human. "What good are biological functions gonna do for him? They ain't his memories."

"I hadn't finished," said DL. "If you remember, I was forced to watch the whole procedure. He was made with haste. The date of my installation was several weeks prior to the finished product. He was thrown together in an afternoon, while you were recovering from-" She trailed off at the sight of his discomfort. "I'm sorry. What I'm trying to say is, Switch was rushed. There might be more stored

away than it appears. Crammed back in a way that even he can't access."

"Either that or that Yobi guy has perfected his art over the years."

"There are mere months between myself and Switch," said DL.

"Well, the evidence that his work got out is creeping around in these walls." Macro waved towards the bug pokemon. "Each one has a computer in its brain, the only difference is they have no database like you and Switch do."

"I'm beginning to wonder who bought the technology off who," said DL. "Or who hacked who, to look at it in another light."

"Both lights are creepy." Macro hugged himself and turned back to Switch. "Well, whether or not he has some memories stored away, they ain't gonna be easy to crack open."

"Well…"

Macro really didn't like that 'well'. He swiveled on his bottom, fixing her with wide-eyed worry. She didn't meet his gaze, instead staring at the floor while obsessively tugging her ear.

"You see," she said, "that's where I come in. If I can connect to him-"

"What? Like some remote computer?"

"Exactly." She finally met his eyes. "I can search around in there and crack open any blocks I find. Make it easy for him to gather some recognition of who he really is. It could be anything, from repressed memories to what he had for dinner last week. But it's something."

"It's really that easy?"

"No."

Macro's heart sank and he slumped into himself.

"There are risk factors," DL went on. "I wouldn't be surprised if defences will have been put into place to prevent such things from happening."

"So there's a chance you won't come out of this unscathed?" Macro's voice was laced with warning and DL glanced back to the floor. "What are the chances you'll get hurt doing this? Will it be irreversible if you do, or just a headache?"

"It could be irreversible," she explained. "Defences are put into place in government computers that can attack and destroy an opposing computer trying to get access to classified files. That's why a good hacker is so valuable to those wanting that information."

"Yes, but for the hacker just their computer will get destroyed!" Macro snapped. "You're talking about a computer in your brain, DL! You could die!"

"I'm aware of that, but I'm trying to save Switch's life here."

"Right now, he's alive!"

"But it's not him."

DL's words froze the space pirate. He stared back at her, mouth agape as he processed what she'd said. He closed his eyes and took a steadying breath.

"DL, I don't want to lose you."

She stared silently at the floor, idly pawing her ear. He thought he saw the glint of a tear in her eye. The thought was too much to bare, but… he glanced back at Switch and closed his eyes again.

"I don't want to lose either of you," he said. "What are the chances you'll come out of this unscathed."

"Eighty percent," she said.

He sucked in a sharp breath and grimaced. "That means one out of five times you do this, you could get hurt? What are the odds you could die?"

"Five percent."

He shook his head sharply as Matrix's beaming face, raving about the five percent drops he'd gained five missions in a row in Alien Hunter, careened through his mind.

"Try not to worry." Her voice was soft, and he realised she'd moved beside him.

Her warm paw rested on his shoulder, but he couldn't open his eyes. He feared if he did, he'd start crying again.

"I'll do my best to be careful," she said. "For Switch's sake, I really want to do this. There's a chance I could help him, and I'm willing to take this risk."

Macro nodded stiffly and whisked his organic paw across his eyes. "Then do it quick. Before I change my mind."

"Well, first thing's first, I need a jack lead and this lab doesn't have one," she said. "I'll need the one off your ship."

He sighed and ran a paw down his face. "That ain't possible. Anchor's taken it to go and get those Ultra Beasts."

"Then I'll buy one."

She rose to her feet and he looked up at her, meeting her gaze. A questioning gaze. Of course. He reached into his pouch and handed her a twenty credit bill. Deep down, the selfish part of him hoped she wouldn't find one.

Once the door closed, he felt very alone. He turned his attention back to Switch. If DL was right, then somewhere deep inside him

some memories might reside. Macro reached towards him and flicked the switch, prompting the same message requesting Socket.

"Socket isn't alive," Macro told him. "You're with me now."

Switch blinked a few times then shook his head. "I was made for Socket. She must be the first pokemon I see."

"Well that ain't gonna happen," said Macro. "Now listen. I want you to search that mind of yours and find any little pockets that might have memories stored in them."

"Memories will inhibit my primary function."

"Tollywosh!" Macro spat. "They'll enhance it. Get searchin'."

The human's eyes went distant, looking through the mawile. Macro sat back on his paws, watching Switch carefully. It seemed to take an eternity as every second ticked past, drawing closer and closer to DL's return. To her potential demise. If he could stop it, he would.

Suddenly, Switch's eyes locked back onto him, taking Macro by surprise.

"Search complete," said Switch. "No memories found."

"You searched everywhere?" Macro asked. "Everywhere?"

"Search is limited to outside the frostwalls."

Frostwalls…

Macro blinked a few times then flashed a canine. "Then break through them and search in there!"

"Cannot comply," said Switch. "Attacking my own database is prohibited."

"I'm commanding you to attack it!"

"Relay command code."

Macro stared at him, dumbfounded. What on earth was a command code? DL had never requested such a thing.

Switch turned away from him to look at the door, his eyes as empty as they had been previously. Just then, the door opened and DL strolled in clutching a brand new jack lead. She looked between Macro and the human and gave a small smile.

"Oh good, he's awake," she said.

Macro felt 'awake' was a very polite way of wording it.

"Now, if you don't mind," she said as she unwound the cable, "I'm just going to link up to you and have a little look around your head."

"Unknown computers are not authorised to link with Download Database," said Switch.

"I am a Download Database," DL explained.

"Incorrect. There is only one Download Database."

DL ignored him, reaching behind his head with the cable. In one swift motion, he flicked his arm and sent DL bowling tail over head across the room. Macro leapt to his feet, but before he could react Switch sparked with static and fell sideways against the wall. Both his arms jerked erratically.

DL dusted herself down and retrieved the cable, fastening it in place at the base of his skull. At Macro's bewildered look, she cleared her throat.

"Just a little thunder wave," she said. "He'll be fine."

She removed a rubber bung from the socket in her own skull and replaced it with the other end of the jack lead. All Macro could do was watch. His mouth turned dry and he dropped down beside her,

reaching for her paw. It fastened around his just before her eyes went as distant as Switch's were.

"Searching files."

Her voice sounded normal, which reassured him. Not like Switch's, monotonous and void of emotion. The long silence that followed, however, washed all reassurance away. He clutched at her paw, willing her to come back out of her search quickly. Successfully. For the both of them to be okay.

"Encountered frostwall." Her words chilled him. "Running break code sequence."

Whatever that meant, it didn't sound good. Switch had said he didn't have the means to break them himself. Macro knew nothing about hacking, and with Surge gone he had no one to contact for a reassuring head's up. All he could do was sit there. Breaking the link might only risk more damage than the procedure itself.

"First layer broken," said DL. "Breaking second layer."

Macro feared his heart would stop. He resisted the urge to lie down, instead taking his computer from his pouch to give him something - anything - to distract himself with. He brought up Central Meta News, but it only served to add to his anxiety. The photo of Distortion's attack on Seed City remained the talk of System. It had already begun to spread towards neighboring cities, driving what was left of Binary City's inhabitants out of their homes.

"Second layer broken. Breaking third layer."

How many layers were there? He wanted to ask, but again the thought of interrupting didn't settle with him. He resigned himself to reading the article. Before he could even make it half way, DL jolted. He snapped his head to look at her. Sweat drops clung to the fur of her forehead and she grimaced.

"DL?" the words left his mouth before he could even finish thinking them.

"Third layer broken," she said. "Encountering memory flood."

He mouthed the words 'memory flood' and looked between her and the human.

"Withdrawing." Her voice sounded weak.

She lifted her paw to remove the jack and slumped sideways onto the floor. Macro scooped her up and pulled her towards him.

"DL, please speak to me." He wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of his paw.

"I'm fine," she said. "Just a little tired."

He muttered a 'thank goodness' as he pulled her into him, brushing her fur with tender claws. A movement drew his eye to Switch. The human blinked a few times then reached behind him with a paw. His eyes widened with terror as he removed the jack lead, examined it, tossed it aside. Then his eyes went to the two pokemon.

"Welcome back, buddy," said Macro.

Switch's eyes widened again. His mouth opened slightly. Then his eyes rolled back in their sockets and he slumped against the wall, unconscious.

It had all happened quite quickly, but one thing was for certain. The look he'd given Macro wasn't just a lack of recognition. It was the look one gives when they're really not expecting something. When something is definitely not meant to happen. Switch hadn't spoken much about his time in the human world, but he'd explained that pokemon didn't speak a language humans could understand.

"Yeah…" Macro cleared his throat. "I guess we've got a lot of explainin' to do later."

…

Celesteela had been too reluctant to fly it solo recruiting other Ultra Beasts. Instead, she opted to follow Wildcard Gamma to the outskirts. It had been a long ride, given they couldn't use hyper drive for fear of losing their newfound ally.

Annie yawned and sprawled back in Macro's seat, her talons adorning the dashboard. "This is taking forever!"

"Then go and get yourself a snack," said Anchor. "It'll be another few hours yet."

She scratched her belly with her wing claws and frowned. "I eat another one of that cupcake's pancakes, I'm gonna be too heavy to fly!" She paused and glanced up at the ceiling. "Not that I can fly. But that's beside the point. I have plans to learn!"

"Well the rest of your crew is in the kitchen enjoyin' a meal," said Anchor. "I think you should join 'em."

"Want me outta your fur, eh?" She slipped from the seat and beat down her feathers. "Gotcha."

She gave him a pointed glare and raised a claw, but something outside the ship caught her eye. She leapt onto the dashboard, eliciting a yelp of surprise from the granbull, and pressed her muzzle up against the glass. Her claws splayed out beside her face and a long 'whoa!' left her throat.

Anchor followed her gaze towards System Ground. A huge dome of purple fire encased a huge stretch of land. Black and purple tendrils erupted from it akin to the chaos that Celesteela had wrecked on Pulse City. Chunks of earth floated around it, some still holding up buildings and twisted mechanical trees.

"Is that Seed City?" Anchor gasped.

"I guess it was." Annie put a lot of emphasis on the 'was', drawing an eye-roll from Anchor. "Man, it looks like a major trip-fest. Way to go on the decor, Distortion!"

The disgust in her voice made Anchor laugh and he gave the archeops a hefty pat on the back. "Imagine what it looks like inside, eh?"

"I don't really want to." Annie pushed herself back from the glass and dropped to the floor. "I prefer my reality not wonky, thank you very much."

"Hang on a sec."

Anchor's voice froze her on her way from the cockpit. She twisted her neck around to look at him and inclined her head on one side. He didn't look at her, instead fixated on the wreckage below them.

"Binary City looks a bit… strange," he said.

Annie hopped back up onto the dashboard to follow his gaze. "What's so strange about it?"

"Look at it!"

More wreckage. The purple tendrils didn't touch it, instead stretching out over the top of it in a weak net. The very edge where it joined onto Seed City was floating, drifting idly.

Annie gave Anchor a sideways glance. "You wanna go check it out, don't you?"

He shrugged his huge shoulders. "Kinda. But… it's a bit too close to Distortion for my likin'."

"Well we're goin'." Annie hopped from the dashboard and waved a claw as she headed for the kitchen. "Let's head down there prepared! We've got our guns, our Z-Moves and our new, ma-hoo-sive friend. We'll be fine!"

Anchor sank back into his seat and ran a paw over his face, letting out a huge sigh. Not only would Annie's crew likely rally behind her, rendering any reasoning he had against the endeavor moot, part of him did feel it would be a good idea to investigate. Besides… there might be an Ultra Beast lurking around there, and they did have to get all of them back home.

So he aimed the schooling wishiwashi towards System Ground, training it like a needle and thread through the fiery net. The closer they got to it, the more of Binary City he could see. Whatever had happened there had reduced the huge entertainment district to a ghost town. Every inhabitant had likely fled. Maybe there wouldn't even be an Ultra Beast.

Wildcard Gamma bucked as Celesteela blasted her rockets to aim herself towards the city. She gracefully slipped through the net and turned to face her bottom to the ground. Her cannons spat fire as she slowly lowered herself between the buildings. Wildcard Gamma wasn't far behind. It hovered above her and stopped.

"What's going on?" Matrix's voice caused Anchor to yelp.

His face flushed and he cleared his throat, brushing back his mohawk. "I forgot you were here."

Matrix wiped frosting from his lips and drifted into his seat. "Guess you want this in auto pilot? Why Binary City?"

"Curiosity." Anchor pushed himself up and reached for his gauntlets. "You're stayin' here. I need you to man the ladder."

He poked his head into the kitchen, exchanging glances with Annie. The archeops froze with a waffle before her open jaws.

"What?" she said. "It ain't a pancake."

"We're goin' on a little trip," said Anchor. "As per Annie's suggestion, I thought it'd be worth our while to investigate Binary City. Might

come across some Ultra Beasts and learn a thing or two about this Distortion."

"You're kidding?" Trojan scoffed. "We're headin' out into the thick of it all? We ain't prepared!"

"It ain't the thick of it all," said Anchor. "It's the outskirts. Just… not the outskirts we were aimin' for."

Poipole poked his head up from Web's tail. "I thought we were going to recruit the kartana?"

"Well, System's huge." Anchor waved a paw. "Let's be a little more linear about it, okay? Either way, I'm goin' down there whether you guys join me or not. Matrix!" He nodded towards the cockpit. "You're in charge!"

"Oh boy." Matrix's voice wavered slightly. "Those are words no one ever wants to hear."

Anchor moved into the airlock and instinctively reached for a mask. Would he even need one in Binary City? The smog might not have made it that far. He'd probably be better off with his jaws available for a fire fang or inferno overdrive. He left the mask where it was and braced himself for the ladder to descend.

"So we're goin' in?" Annie appeared beside him and placed her claws on her hips, admiring the drop. "Bring it!"

"It's like you've got a jackin' death wish." Trojan sighed and pushed back his head fin. "I hope for your sake we find an Ultra Beast, 'cos if we're riskin' life and limb for nothin'…"

"It ain't nothin'." Anchor glared at him over his shoulder and reached for the ladder. "It's research. If we learn a bit about our enemy doin' this-"

The words died on his throat as the ladder dropped towards System Ground. The rest of his allies scrambled for the ladder, except for Waveform. The decidueye dropped and took to the sky, rivaling the ladder for speed.

"Tally ho!" Annie shot past them, wings spread-eagled.

Waveform let out a surprised hoot and took off after her. Her hysterical laughter filled the air and with a flourish, Waveform grabbed her by the tail in his talons. Just before she hit the floor.

Anchor landed beside them and shook his head. "You moron!"

"That was amazing!" Annie spread her wings and beamed up at them. "I almost flew! I wanna go again!"

"Keep your voice down!" Anchor hissed. He glanced at the buildings. "The walls had eyes in the mansion. These ones might have ears."

He moved past them, leaving Annie and her crew to gather themselves.

She fixed Waveform with a cocked eyebrow. "Was that a joke? It sounded like a joke."

Waveform pinched the bridge of his beak and sighed, moving past Annie into the city. She waddled after him, catching up with both him and Anchor. Web and Trojan covered the rear, the latter clutching his laser like a lifeline.

The entire city seemed lifeless. Not even a scrap of litter blew along the gutter. Binary City had a reputation for being clean, except for after major concerts. Even then, pokemon were rallied up and rewarded for gathering the most litter in a short spurt of time. It kept the city clean and welcoming. 'Welcoming' being a rarity amid System's type discrimination.

Now, the welcoming city was a desolate wasteland. Every turn of a corner brought nothing but rubble and a lifeless building. The culprit for the damage lay in the tendrils that hovered overhead, clipping the tops from the massive skyscrapers. The rest of the damage was yet to be understood. Nihilego? Another Ultra Beast? The mansion's attempts to land, cleaving through the streets like a rogue bulldozer?

A small explosion shook the air, and Annie bristled from ear to tail.

"What was that?" she squeaked.

Waveform whisked her behind him and a few stray bricks peppered the spot she'd previously occupied.

"I think it's that." Anchor pointed a claw.

One of the purple tendrils writhed, bringing down more bricks as it retaliated against a second shadowy explosion.

"I think someone's fightin' it," he said.

The granbull took off around the corner, followed closely by Annie and her crew. He skidded to a halt, eyes wide, as he almost crashed into the spindly culprit. He did a double take and stared back into the semi-translucent head of the most colourful Ultra Beast he'd laid eyes on. A ball of shadowy energy filled its right paw, but it fizzled out as it straightened. Then, it bowed with a flourish.

"What the-" Anchor shook his head sharply.

"Blacephalon!" Poipole shot from Web's tail, drawing the Ultra Beast's attention. "It's a blacephalon! You're from a different region back in my world!"

"My oh my," the blacephalon replied, his head flashing with a rainbow of colours. Just like Poipole's, the voice spoke in Anchor's head. "A little poipole. Well, you lot are a much more friendly bunch than the previous creature I encountered."

Anchor shook his head again and placed a paw to his temple. "Wait, hang on a sec… you can talk like this guy? Yet Celesteela can't? I…"

Celesteela's wailing voice sliced the air and Poipole twisted towards her, hissing a 'shush!' The purple tendrils writhed slightly, and the blacephalon side-stepped to dodge a tumbling brick.

"It would be advised to keep our voices down a tad," he said. "This wretched fellow has already claimed my friends."

He swiveled what served as his head towards the mound of bricks, and the sparkling lights inside his head turned a sombre blue. Anchor's heart sank and he took a cautious step towards the rubble.

"What happened here?" he asked.

"Some android showed up and wrecked the city, along with some ghost of a dragon," the blacephalon explained. "I saw them off, but not before they tried to suck me into another one of those portholes. My friends and I were already recovering from his attack, but then all this purple stuff showed up. A lot of my friends were killed. I've been burying them."

Trojan lifted a paw and pinched the bridge of his nose. "So let me get this straight. While the rest of System has been runnin' in terror from you aliens, you've been makin' friends?!"

The lights inside the blacephalon's head flickered with a rainbow hue. "Of course. My trainer taught me to respect all life. Some of my closest friends back in my world are very different species to me. Your races are no different."

Anchor beamed from ear to ear and stuck out his paw. "Then you're a friend of ours. Call me Anchor."

The blacephalon took his paw and shook it. "A gesture the pokemon here taught me. They called me Rave. I'd like you to do the same."

"Wait!" Poipole drifted before the blacephalon's head. "You let them name you? What about your trainer?"

"My trainer's name for me is something I hold dear," Rave explained. "But the pokemon here named me, too. At the end of the day, the name a trainer gives you is different to the one your mother gave you. Each name expresses how those who gave it to you felt. My mother would still call me by the name she gave me, as would my trainer. What about you?"

"She called me Poipole."

"Then that tells me she respects what you are!" Rave sparkled jubilantly. "The pokemon here saw I loved music and named me after my dancing. I liked it, so I kept it."

Poipole twisted his head to look at Annie. "This one nicknames everyone."

"Fantastic!" Rave ducked to look the archeops in the eye. "What is your name for me?"

Annie scratched her chin with a claw. "You kinda look like a big gumdrop. So… big gumdrop I guess."

"I like it!" Rave removed his head and span it around in one paw. "So… I've made some new friends."

"Good grief," Trojan muttered. "And I thought Annie was eccentric."

"I'm glad you think of us as friends," said Anchor. "Because we really need your help."

"Certainly!" Rave placed his head back so it was hovering where his neck would have been. "How can I be of help?"

"You said you fought off that ghost dragon and the android?" Anchor folded his arms and grinned. "Well, that dragon thing happens to go

by the name Distortion. Or The Altered One, as Poipole described it to Celesteela."

Rave gasped and his lights turned a pale, icy white.

"You ain't gonna faint are you?" Anchor asked.

"No. Not at all. I just… hadn't put two and two together, that's all." Rave fell onto his bottom.

"Do you want me to go on?" Anchor asked.

"Please do."

"Okay. So Distortion's taken over the mayor's mansion, and in turn has also taken over Seed City just north of here. That's what all this is." Anchor waved at the purple fire.

Rave made a thoughtful noise as he eyed the flames. "I knew the fire was down to that dragon. But… I didn't think he was trying to take over your world. I assumed he was just another hostile mishap dragged into your poor world."

"He kinda is," said Annie.

"Well, I shall be happy to help remove him!" Rave leapt back to his feet and sparkled. "Now, what shall we do with the other fellow holed up in this joint?"

Anchor's face fell. "What other fellow?"

"The unfriendly one who gave me a hard time." Rave shrugged. "I only offered to help, but he blasted me with electricity and told me to, ahem… 'sod off'."

"All right." Anchor's voice came out slow and cautious. "Another Ultra Beast?"

"I'm not sure," said Rave. "But I've not seen one before. I've seen ones that look a little similar… but this fellow was significantly different."

"I feel like he's speakin' in riddles," said Trojan.

Waveform and Web nodded.

"Lead the way, friend." Anchor placed a paw on the blacephalon's back.

"Certainly!" Rave bounded along ahead of them, each step almost jubilant.

"Can I ask you somethin'?" Annie trotted beside him. "How come you and Poipole can speak to us, but Celesteela can't?"

"Oh, that one's easy," said Rave. "Poipole and I have spent a lot of time trying to communicate with a species very different to ourselves. So we adapted a method to do so. I'm going to guess Celesteela doesn't have a trainer."

He waved at the tall, bamboo creature. She returned his wave with a rather unimpressed leer.

"This is where the rude fellow is holed up." Rave stopped just mid-way down a narrow alley. He gestured to a cracked window. "Won't come out. That's how I managed to escape."

Anchor knocked firmly on the glass, shattering it. His face fell and he withdrew his paw, tucking it behind his back. He lowered his head to speak through the now accessible window.

"Hello? Anyone in there?"

No response.

Using his gauntlets, he pulled away the jagged glass and ran the metal wrist guard over the edge of the frame. Then he vaulted inside.

"Watch out, there might still be sharp bits," he said.

"Ouch!"

He swiveled on the spot to see Annie sucking on a claw. "What did I just say?"

Heavy panting came from the corridor behind him and he turned back to face a wide open door. A shadowy figure lumbered through it, and as he stepped into the light, it reflected off his deep orange coat. Yobi narrowed his eyes at Anchor, but a slick sweat betrayed his exhaustion.

The sparksurfer raichu pointed a claw at him with his free paw. The other one was held down by a hunk of metal reminiscent of a vikavolt's jaws. Heavy metal armor covered his right arm up to the shoulder.

"You!" he roared. "You murderous… this is all your fault!"

"Hang on a sec!" Anchor placed his paws on his chest. "How is this our fault?!"

Yobi flashed his sharp front teeth. "If it weren't for your criminal prying, none of this would've happened!"

"If you hadn't designed an android that could open time and space, none of this would have happened!"

The raichu took a few deep breaths to gather himself, then waved his free paw. "It was a flawless plan." He tore his eyes off the space pirate. "And if she'd let me install a kill switch, it would have been even more flawless. But no… she had to be scared someone would intervene. Oh wait… she was right!"

"Our intervenin' had nothin' to do with this! You're the one who made such a dangerous machine-"

Anchor cut off as Trojan shoved him aside. The scrafty aimed his laser at Yobi and squeezed the trigger. Anchor swiped his paw, aiming the laser into the ground. It narrowly skimmed Yobi's feet, reflected back off some invisible barrier. The deadly beam struck above the window frame, cleaving a hole in the crumbling stone.

The pokemon outside choked on the dust, scrambling back. Debris filled the empty room, clouding out Yobi's form. Trojan swiped at the cloud and flashed his canines at Anchor.

"You moron! What do you think you're doin'?" he scoffed.

"We need him alive," said Anchor. "Only he knows how to stop that BackDoor!"

"So do I," said Trojan. "It's called 'scrap metal'. I built our ship out of it. All I need to do is flatten it out and remove the dangerous bits."

"And how do you plan on openin' portholes to send all the Ultra Beasts home after you destroy it?"

"It's no use," said Yobi. "Your only hope now is to find another world. Because when I get my paws on BackDoor, he's dead."

Anchor's jaw went slack. "Eh?"

"You heard me." Yobi hunched over as he gasped for breath. "Now scram."

"No," said Anchor. "Not until you tell me why you wanna dismantle your own creation. Aren't you wantin' to find the perfect world?"

"It doesn't exist!" Yobi hissed.

"What are you wafflin' about?" Annie scoffed. "You had all us hapless creatures dragged from our own world - to which I say thank you by the way. This one makes the one I came from look like a horror show. But nevertheless, little guys like Sticky here wanna get back home! So you did all that… for nothin'?"

"Shut up, human," spat the raichu. "I made BackDoor for her. So she could find her own perfect world, and I'd be going with her. But he killed her! So what's the point? I'm gonna destroy him myself, and if I can't I'll go down trying."

Anchor stared at the raichu dumbfounded. The exhausted pokemon dragged himself to his feet, staggering under the weight of the vikavolt weapon.

"Consider it a race," he said. "Whichever of us gets to him first gets the pleasure of dismantling him. I'll see you lot at the finish line, and end your pathetic existence then."

Trojan readied his laser again. "You're lettin' us live?"

"For now," said Yobi. "Someone has to put a stop to BackDoor, and the more pokemon there are trying to stop him, the smaller his chance at survival." A small smirk tugged at the scientist's lips. "Priorities. He falls before you do. Now scram, before I change my mind."

Anchor tugged the laser from Trojan's paws, much to the scrafty's protests.

"Leave him," said the granbull. "He has a point. Besides, there's more of us than there are of him."

He vaulted through the window and called for Matrix.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 74

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Seventy Four

Switch cowered on the opposite side of the coffee table. Once he'd come to, he'd been a panicked and frantic mess. Backing away from the dewott doctor, freezing up as the otter pokemon ran some brief tests before finally nodding and taking a step back.

Switch was perfectly healthy except for one thing. Some kind of abstract amnesia, the dewott had called it. Then, DL and Macro had been given a scolding. Outside the laboratory, of course, so as not to frighten the human any further. But both Jumper and the doctor couldn't really fault what they'd done. It had been a success. Well… success was a generous way of wording it.

Macro looked up from his occa espresso and rubbed a thumb and claw beneath his tired eyes. Switch didn't look much better than he felt. The human sat trembling, clutching a cocoa in both hands, desperately avoiding any eye contact with the mawile and DL. They'd barely been able to tell him anything. It was all too much. So far, he'd been told that yes, he was indeed a human, and no, he was not mad. His presence in their world was due to an accident. They hadn't even broached his watch, his other form, or any of System's current disasters.

"Is any of it sinking in yet?" Macro asked.

Switch shook his head and his voice wavered as he spoke. "One minute I'm sat having Sunday dinner with my folks, the next…" He waved a hand at the cozy meeting room and trailed off.

Macro clenched his teeth together. Switch didn't even recall the events that had dragged the humans into System in the first place.

Had he even relayed the story to Macro? He didn't think so. If Switch even had… Macro hadn't been listening. The mawile sank in his seat and pinched the bridge of his nose. The whole ordeal had made him realise how very little he knew about his friend.

"I still don't understand why I'm here," said Switch. "Why you all talk… my pet growlithe doesn't talk. I always wished she did, but… now it's kinda… creepy."

Creepy…

Macro glanced up from his rapidly cooling espresso. He took that opportunity to quickly down it and cast the tiny cup aside.

"Bit of a harsh word, pal," he said. "One thing that never crossed my mind was that you are creepy. Mainly because you look nothin' like all them depictions in picture books. Now those are creepy."

"I'm sorry," Switch muttered. "I know you're trying to help me."

"Hah. One of my first priorities is to get you back home."

"So I'll see my family again?" Switch looked up at him with those deep, golden eyes.

Macro felt his heart sink like a lead ball. His mouth opened slightly but no words came out. Of course… the 'home' Switch had always referred to… it wasn't sitting around a dinner table with his parents and pet growlithe. How on earth was he going to breach the fact that his 'home' was back in System's distant past? With pokemon friends and Macro's 'great times fifty grandparents'?

DL lowered her own cocoa to the table. "That's… not quite what we meant."

"What do you mean?" Switch panicked.

DL met his eyes, keeping her voice as soft and as calm as she could. "Switch-"

"How many times? That's not my name!"

"It's what we've been calling you for the past few weeks," she explained. "It's how you introduced yourself."

Switch's golden eyes widened with fear. "'Past few weeks'? I've only just got here!"

Macro rose and lifted a paw to calm him, but the human fell from his seat and skittered backwards on his bottom, not taking his eyes off the space pirate.

"What have you done to me?" Switch squeaked.

"We haven't done anything to you," said DL.

"Lies! You're feeding me lies! You've done something to me. Put something in my head…"

Macro sank back into his seat, blinking back tears. "Switch…"

"My name's Johnathan!" Switch roared. "I'm not from your stinking world! I'm from Unova! Now send me home!"

He flailed his arms, striking the leg of his chair. In a flash, his form shrank down and sprawled onto the floor with a soft thud. Macro leapt to his feet and dashed around the coffee table. Switch lay staring at his feathered wing, beak opening and closing as a growing dread lit up behind his eyes. He floundered to his feet, wobbling as he tried to keep his balance.

"You have done something to me," he hissed. "Well… whatever it is, I have a type advantage!"

He opened his beak wide then snapped it shut again, a look of realisation crossing his face. Just like with DL, any memories of how to use his attacks had been taken away.

Macro raised his paws and took a step towards him. "Please, listen to me."

"No! Not until you tell me what you've done to me."

"I haven't done anything to you!" Macro closed his eyes and bit his lip hard. There was really no sense in raising his voice. "Sorry. I just want to help you."

"Then who's done this to me?" asked Switch. "Who put this computer into my head? Who turned me into some dumb bird?!"

He staggered forwards, losing his balance. Wings spread at his side, he landed flat on his chest. He screwed his eyes shut and screeched, flailing his wings in an action reminiscent of a grounded magikarp.

"I don't want to be a bird!" he roared.

Macro grabbed the watch around his leg and pressed the button, returning Switch to his human form. He looked down at himself then at Macro.

"How did you-?"

"The watch." Macro returned to his previous spot and sat down facing him. "It allows you to go back and forth. Your friend made it for you."

Switch narrowed his eyes at the mawile. "What friend?"

Macro shrugged. "A friend back home. I think you called him N00b."

"I don't…" Switch shook his head slowly.

"Well, I can't tell you much about your friends," said Macro. "I never thought to ask much about your past. My job is to send you back there, not get a history lesson or write your biography." He scratched

his nose and sighed. "Although it woulda been useful had I known this would happen."

Switch sat back against the wall and folded his hands into his lap, staring down at the mawile. Although all previous hostility had vanished.

"You're not lying… are you?" His voice wavered with uncertainty. "I mean… you haven't a clue what to even tell me."

"I told you I'm not lying," said Macro. "What reason do I have? You're my friend!"

"Yet you don't know anything about me?"

"Give me credit, I've known you about three weeks. And a huge chunk of that you spent here, on this island." Macro pointed a claw at the floor. "You had to. You got seriously hurt defending this place."

Switch's eyes widened again. "What?"

Macro sighed and rubbed his temples. "I should really start at the beginning, shouldn't I?"

Switch nodded stiffly, not taking his eyes off the space pirate.

So Macro hugged his knees into himself, toying with the hem of his scarf, as he relayed everything. Finding DL and discovering Socket's plan; the golden ring gateway that pulled Switch into their world; the war in Cyan City that rendered Switch bedridden; the Ultra Beasts and Wildcard Gamma's visit with Solgaleo; the kartana attack that reunited Wildcard Gamma with Switch; DL's painful memories and Switch's offer to look after her; finally ending with the battle in Socket's mansion.

Switch sat blinking as he processed it all. Everything had been rather nutshelled. Reduced into bite-sized chunks so as not to overwhelm

him with information. But it still proved too much. He sank back against the wall and ran a hand down his face.

"There it is," he sighed.

Macro jerked his head up. "There what is?"

"The abstract lie." Switch looked back down at him. "It's in every thriller movie where some character gets amnesia. The bad guy feeds them a lie to win them to their side."

Macro blinked. "Pardon?"

Switch spread his arms. "How do I know you're not the bad guy? This Socket might be the good guy in all this, and you're just a bunch of rebels."

"Sounds awful familiar." Macro inclined his head at Switch and scratched beneath his goggles. "You came up with the same argument shortly after we met. Went off in a tantrum."

"If that's true, then I probably had a point."

DL rummaged beneath the table, drawing their attention.

"What've you got there?" Macro asked.

"Oh, when you were talking with Jumper and the doctor, I went back to my hotel room." She pulled out a plastic bag and reached into it. "I thought this might be helpful, but… I was waiting for the right moment."

Macro found a tattered bundle shoved into his paws. He stared down at it, noting the charred blue and black fabric. He unraveled it, revealing his black scarf with the blue pixelated print. Damaged beyond use. Huge holes had been burnt into it, and the ends were tattered into shreds. But DL's intentions were pretty clear. He looked up at Switch and placed the scarf on the floor between them.

"What's this?" Switch waved a hand at it, his face creasing with confusion.

"You bought it for me," said Macro. "After you'd cooled down, as a peace offering. Said you thought it matched my laser's blue trim."

Switch scanned the mawile's small frame. "What laser?"

Macro shrugged his shoulders. "I don't have one anymore. And the one that did work, well…" He waved his mechanical paw.

"Guns and pokemon don't mix," said Switch. "Although they don't mix with humans either, if I'm honest."

Macro chuckled and smoothed out the tattered scarf. "Well, now I've seen this, things are startin' to come back to me. And you're startin' to sound more like your normal self."

Switch raised an eyebrow, prompting an explanation.

Macro shrugged and cracked a smile. "Not convinced? Well… you've not been happy with this world since you got sucked into it. It's wildly different to your System."

"I'm not from System."

"Your System is the one that gave you that talonflame body. Gave you your friends, like N00b and my ancient relatives." Macro lifted a paw to silence Switch before he could pelt him with questions. "That was about a thousand years ago now. Back then, it weren't as messy as it is now. Pokemon didn't eat each other, there weren't space pirates, no toxic air, and no laser guns. You were most disgusted at pokemon eating the water dwelling types. So much so, you said after I'd send you back, you'd try and change that. Know what I did after you said that to me? I laughed."

Switch's nose crinkled. "Doesn't sound like a very nice response."

"It weren't." Macro smoothed his paw over his scarf. "Thing is… I now think it wouldn't be a bad idea. Not sure if it would work, or how it would affect me. I mean… if you went back and changed the future, would I even be here? What life would I live if I did? How much would change, really?"

DL tensed beside him. Then she reached forward and plucked his paw from the scarf, clutching it tightly in hers.

"Maybe there wouldn't be any Socket," Macro went on, staring down at the blue and black print. "No BackDoor. None of this bad stuff would even have happened."

They sat in silence for a while and Macro let his mind drift to that thought. A peaceful System. His mother might even have survived. Air would be clean everywhere, allowing trees to grow fruit, and no meat for food. The mayor wouldn't have grown desperate, throwing up a divide that separated the water dwellers from the land pokemon. With nothing to rebel against, there likely would have been no space pirates. No floating cities to escape the polluted ground.

He felt DL's paw shift in his, and he stroked a claw over her soft fur. Would they even have met? Without Socket's wretched plan and Macro's reckless curiosity, their paths probably would never have crossed. And with no floating cities, there'd be no Botnet. He slipped his paw from hers and pulled her into him, nuzzling between her ears as his eyes fixed on a filing cabinet at the far end of the room.

Changes would bring their good and their bad. It would be inevitable.

Switch shifted against the wall, his clothes rustling and drawing Macro out of his deep thoughts.

"Well, you've given me a lot to think about," said Switch. "Although I am wondering about this other System you told me about. The one I'm apparently from."

Macro fixed one eye on him. "So you believe me?"

"I'm not sure what to believe," said Switch. "But I want to know more about what happened to turn me into a talonflame."

"Even I don't know that." Macro released DL and sat back on his paws. "I could hand you a history book, but I'm led to believe they ain't accurate."

"How aren't they accurate?" Switch scoffed.

"They got the picture of a human wrong, for one thing," said Macro. "And the drifting continents you are adamant were real, well… they've been demoted to 'myth' status in this day and age. Although that might be changed now, given Socket's used one of their salvaged engines to get her mansion flyin'."

Switch blinked a few times then pinched his nose. "This is all too much to take in…"

"I can believe it." Macro pushed himself to his feet. "If you need a break, I'll go call the doctor and see if your room is ready."

Switch kept his head down as he waved him away.

Macro gave him one last glance as he let DL out of the door, the tattered scarf bundled in her arms. Then the space pirate closed the door behind him. At least they'd got through to Switch. Now they just had to hope he'd take it all in, not just for his sake, but for System's too.

…

It was a long way to Spool City. Matrix estimated another two hours at least. Anchor sat back in his seat, watching the world below. The antennae were still blinking, but the one for Meta City was long since dead. All communications to the capital had been cut off, and from what Anchor had read, the xurkitree were making their way across the outskirts. Hardly a bad thing. They'd swoop in and grab both them and the kartana, provided they listened.

The granbull kicked himself from the dashboard and moved towards the kitchen, catching a glance from Matrix. He nodded at the ribombee then gestured to the window.

"I'm gonna grab some supper, I'm starved," he said. "Let me know if anythin' weird happens."

"Define 'weird'," said Matrix. "Because I'm not gonna lie… it's sort of losing its meaning."

"I dunno…" Anchor rubbed his muzzle. "Flying Ultra Beasts. Portholes. Ships. Whatever seems threatening or out of the norm. Or both."

Matrix nodded and swiveled his chair back to the navigation deck. "Alright. Grab me a donut, would you?"

Anchor waved him off and marched into the kitchen. Sure enough, a plate of donuts sat on the table. He grabbed one just as Rave delivered a plate of pancakes to an excited Annie. The human practically danced in her seat with her knife and fork clutched in each hand.

"You joining us?" Rave asked. "This truly is top nosh."

Anchor wanted to say he had no idea what nosh was, but instead he nodded back to the cockpit. "Gonna give this to Matrix. I'll be back in a sec."

He returned to the navigator who grabbed the donut gratefully. Before he could bite into it, Anchor wagged a claw at him.

"Don't tell Macro I allowed you to have a jam donut in here," he said.

"Noted." Matrix bit into his donut, letting jam fall down his scarf and onto his lap. He frowned at it, scooped it in one paw and licked. "I think I'm spending too long with him anyway. I'm picking up his bad habits."

Anchor rolled his eyes and marched back into the kitchen, where he pulled up a seat opposite Annie. She attacked Cookie's pancakes with all the vigor of a half-starved tyranitar. He reached across the table to grab the plate of pancakes and nomel sauce.

"You're acting like you've never had pancakes before in your life," he said.

"I haven't!" Annie said around her mouthful. "Not before I came on your ship. This is amazing!"

The slurpuff chef waddled over with yet more sauce, followed by Rave and a tray of waffles.

Annie's eyes lit up with delight. "You're spoilin' me!"

"Enjoy yourself," Cookie chirruped. "I made plenty."

Web frowned at the slurpuff. "You're a bad influence." She turned back to Annie who payed her no heed. "You should slow down. You'll give yourself tummy ache."

"I'll stop when I'm full," said Annie between bites.

The kitchen slowly began to calm down as the rag-tag group enjoyed their supper. As Web rose to help Cookie and Rave clear the dishes away, Matrix buzzed into the kitchen.

"Decided to join us?" Anchor asked.

Matrix shook his head and wound his antenna thoughtfully. "Remember when you said to alert you if something weird happens?"

Anchor lowered his fork to his plate. "Yes?"

"Well, something weird's happening."

Anchor rose to his feet and followed Matrix back into the cockpit. The granbull's first thought was the navigation deck, but Matrix pointed a claw towards the windscreen. Anchor narrowed his eyes at the gold speck moving towards them, and he placed his paws on the dashboard, leaning forward for a closer look. Rave joined his side, ducking slightly to avoid hitting his head on the window frame.

"What is that?" the blacephalon asked.

Anchor glanced up at the Ultra Beast. "I've no idea. But if I were to hazard a guess, that's one of Socket's ships."

"But Socket's gone," said Matrix. "Who are they working for now? Distortion?"

"I dunno… but I'm wary of it. I say we steer well clear of it."

"But they could be in danger," said Rave. "We can't just run away."

"Our tall, enigmatic friend is right!"

Annie's voice almost made Anchor jump out of his skin. His head struck the low ceiling and he spun to face her, rubbing at his mohawk. The human beamed at him from ear to ear.

"We can't leave a 'mon down," she said. "Perchance that golden speck needs our help, I say we check on 'em!"

"But it's a government ship!" Anchor growled. "It might fire on us."

"I highly doubt it," said Matrix.

Anchor turned to the ribombee, who returned his look with a cocked eyebrow.

"How can you tell when it's so far away?" Anchor asked.

"Easy." Matrix tapped the navigation deck. A red light flickered in the top right corner where the speck showed on the navigation screen.

"They sent us a distress signal."

Anchor's jaw dropped. "A what now?"

"Yeah, confused me too." Matrix wound his antenna as he watched the flashing light. "I've never seen it before. Strange phenomenon."

"All right." Anchor sighed and returned to his seat. "Get us closer, let's see what they want."

"You're not worried it's a trap?" Matrix asked.

"It might be, but we're armed to the gills."

"Hmm, fitting," said Annie. "Because we're in a giant fish."

Anchor fired her a sideways glare.

"Oh come on!" Annie threw her arms in the air. "That was fantastic!"

Rave chuckled, his lights flickering with a jubilant pink. He smacked the human on the back, hard enough to make her stumble into the dash. "That was a cracking good joke. Well done."

Anchor rubbed his brow and groaned under his breath. "And System's relyin' on 'mon like us?"

As Wildcard Gamma drew closer to the golden speck, the cockpit slowly filled with the rest of their team. With no one small enough to fit in the captain's seat, Annie and her friends gathered around it, holding on perchance things should turn awry.

Trojan frowned out at the government ship, wiping his paws on his wet scales. But the scrafty said nothing. None of them said anything. The ship didn't appear to be hostile. Instead drawing towards them at a steady pace.

Anchor leant forward in his seat, narrowing his eyes at it. Well, there was definitely a reason it wasn't being hostile. The golden hull was

dented, even cracked. One of the pointed wings bent upwards at an alarming angle. It was little wonder it could fly straight. The windscreen was shattered, the jagged edges peppered with frost. What remained of its laser cannon was nothing more than a ragged lump, the main body of which one could guess lay miles below. Possibly in the ocean.

"I'm gonna grab her." Anchor jabbed the controls, causing the wishiwashi's jaws to slowly open. "I'll meet what's left of that ship's crew in the cargo bay, but I ain't goin' alone. Who's with me?"

"I'll go," said Trojan. "They retaliate, I'll jackin' nut 'em."

"Not one for trustin' others, eh?" Anchor asked.

Trojan scowled up at him. "This comin' from a space pirate?"

"I'll go too." Waveform pushed himself back from Macro's seat. "You'll need someone to keep Trojan in check."

"I can check myself," Trojan spat.

"Hey!" Annie pouted. "What about me?"

"You stay here with Web," said Anchor. "You too, Rave. I don't want to terrify whoever's down there."

Rave gasped, his lights paling, and turned his faceless head between the cockpit's occupants. "I'm terrifying?"

Matrix turned in his seat to watch Anchor lead the group from the cockpit. Then he turned back to Rave, idly winding his antenna.

The ribombee shrugged at the Ultra Beast, who was somehow managing to look a little wounded. "I'm saying nothing."

Anchor went down into the cargo bay first, with Trojan sandwiched between himself and Waveform. It was oddly silent. Anchor couldn't help but wonder how long the distress signal had been going off.

Maybe it wasn't even intended for Wildcard Gamma? What if the occupant had actually died and the ship was idly flying through System Sky until it finally ran out of fuel? He shoved that thought aside, but still mentally prepared himself for a possible grisly find.

The golden ship lay ruined in the cargo bay. It had barely made it inside. Wildcard Gamma's jaws were closed tight around the tail end of the ship, tearing away what was left of the rudder. The ship didn't entirely fit inside the bay. The tips of the wings were missing, also removed by Wildcard Gamma's jaws. It was only slightly bigger than Surge's ship, and Anchor was greatly relieved they'd already disposed of that a week prior, otherwise it would never have fit.

Trojan beat his paws together and sidled past the granbull. "Let's get this thing open then, eh? See who's inside."

Anchor joined him, glancing up at the cracked window. He couldn't see a passenger. Had they already abandoned ship? No, it made no sense. It was still flying… unless… no, he wasn't going to speculate the worse. He joined Trojan around the side, leaving Waveform with his arrow notched and ready to fire.

Before the pair reached the door, a loud bang came from behind it. Then another. Anchor clenched his paws together, bracing himself as whatever was behind it crashed against the door again. Then it flew open, swinging on its hinges. An emolga clutched the door frame, gasping for breath. His entire body trembled from nose to tail, the remains of frost melting from his fur. Then he slumped forwards, toppling from the steps. Anchor leapt towards him, catching his small body before it hit the ground.

"Good grief, what happened to you?" Anchor asked.

The emolga cracked one eye open. "The kracken… they…"

Then it closed again as the small electric type dropped unconscious.

"Huh." Anchor looked up at his two companions, then rose to his feet, cradling the emolga. "Somethin' makes me think we're gonna have a hard time roundin' up them nihilego."

…

Annie blinked down at the sleeping electric type. "So we got a pet?"

Web shoved her from the side. "He's not a pet."

The human watched as the skuntank aided Cookie in tending to their unconscious guest.

"So what's wrong with him?" Anchor asked. "Is he poisoned? Wounded?"

"Half frozen and exhausted," said Cookie. "That's it. Makes me wonder if he's been around the Dead Glacier."

"Why would anyone go there?" Waveform asked. "You'd freeze to death."

"He said he'd had a run in with the kraken," said Anchor. "That's the nickname the space pirates coined for the nihilego. My guess is it's spread, and he was fightin' them off. If they don't like the cold, he might have used the Dead Glacier to get rid of them."

"Seems convoluted and risky," said Waveform. "I doubt it."

The granbull shrugged his shoulders and returned to observing Web and Cookie. The slurpuff took a step back, wiping his paws on a towel.

"How's he lookin'?" Anchor asked.

"He's fine." Cookie poked his tongue out and smiled. "A hot cocoa and he'll be good as new!"

Web sighed and shook her head. "It's always sweets with you, isn't it?"

Cookie's smile vanished and he huffed, sticking out his bottom lip. "Don't knock it if it works!" Then he waddled from the room.

"I'd say what he needs is some berries!" Web called after him. "Aspear berries!"

"I think we should let him get some rest," said Waveform. "In peace."

"I dunno." Anchor scratched his nose. "This is a wild turn of events. I mean… a government 'mon on a space pirate ship?"

"Hey, he needed rescuing," said Annie. "And we just happened to be there."

"Annie's right," said Web. "In times like these, we need to work together. Maybe he sees that."

"Not to mention, no Socket means no bounty," said Waveform. "So he's not getting anything out of this."

"Well I can't just leave him here," said Anchor. "Who knows what he's gonna do?"

"I wasn't suggesting that." Waveform drew one of his silver arrows. "I'll keep watch on the door, while you go and forget about it for a while. Have a nap, or a snack. Whatever it is you do to unwind."

"I'm afraid there's no time for that," said Web.

Everyone followed her gaze. The emolga stirred, rubbing a paw over his eyes. His mouth turned into a frown and he let out a whimper. Sparks flew from his cheeks and he sat bolt upright with a scream. Electricity flew across the room, and Anchor ducked, feeling the heat as it skimmed his mohawk. A yelp came from his right and he turned to find Annie stunned on the floor, electricity dancing across her limbs.

Waveform dropped his arrow and leapt to her side. He sat her up against his open wing and turned his eyes onto the emolga. The small pokemon sat, panting, his wide eyes fixed on the wall. He glanced to his side and tensed, clasping his paws into fists.

Anchor lifted his paws and slowly rose to his feet. "Calm down. We rescued you."

"Where is it?" the emolga gasped.

"Where's what?"

"The kraken?"

"We didn't see one," Anchor explained. "Your ship was alone."

"Alone?" The emolga ran his paws down his face, then slumped forward on his knees. "I'm the only one?"

The small group exchanged glances, then Anchor and Web drew closer to the bed. Anchor ventured to place his paw on the emolga's back. He didn't so much as flinch.

"Okay, let's start from the top," said Anchor. "What's your name?"

"Axle," the emolga muttered.

"Okay, Axle. Welcome aboard Wildcard Gamma."

Axle's ears twitched at that.

"My name's Anchor," Anchor went on. "And your ship is tucked away in our cargo bay. We're here to get those things you're calling kraken back to their world. Why don't you tell us what happened?"

"Back to their world?" Axle removed his paws to glare at the granbull. "Are you insane?! An entire fleet of Socket's ships couldn't stop those things!"

"No offense," said Annie, "but your ships are pretty dang tiny."

"Compared to Wildcard Gamma, sure!" Axle spat. "But a fleet of them? They're quick. Agile. One cannon shot is equivalent to… I dunno… several of your bomb things!"

"You're wrong there," Anchor muttered.

"Sorry," Axle growled. "Have you got a case of 'my ship is better than your ship' syndrome?"

"No, I just modeled it to be stronger than a government ship," said Anchor. "It's called 'survival'."

Axle snorted and leant on his knees, fixing his eyes on the door. "Well… I doubt your ship will stand a chance against those monsters."

"You have a point," said Anchor. "We struggled against just one, and there were four ships fightin' that thing."

The door slid open and Cookie waddled in, clutching a steaming mug of cocoa. A look of delighted surprise crossed his face, and he poked out his tongue in a smile.

"You're awake!" He shuffled over to Axle and held out the mug. "I made you cocoa. With aspear sprinkles."

Web slapped a paw to her face then sighed. "Well, at least you listened…"

Axle took it hesitantly then looked down at Cookie. "Why are you all doing this?"

"Because…" Cookie stuttered slightly and shuffled his paws. "Because… you were frozen and… well… cocoa!"

"You needed help," said Anchor. "And we can't afford to discriminate in times like these."

Axle sighed and stared into his cocoa. "I suppose you're right." He paused and tucked his knees closer to his chest. "There were fifty of us. We were on our way back to Socket's mansion after scouring for a Zero Day model. Yobi had requested one, and it took us ages to track one down. But when we returned to Meta City, Socket had already taken off and her mansion… it was all eerie, I don't know what had happened to it, but we decided to stay away. Go somewhere else and call Yobi. I assumed an Ultra Beast had taken over it."

"You're kinda right," said Annie.

Axle fired her a glare then returned to his cocoa-gazing. "Whatever it was, it gave me the creeps. To make matters worse, Yobi wasn't answering our calls. Then one day, we couldn't get through at all. None of us knew what to do, so we decided to find him ourselves. Go back to Meta City and ask around. Of course, that was a risk. It's crawling with those electrical beasts. But before we even reached it, we were mobbed by those kraken. They took over our ships, made us fire at each other, twisted the lasers free and broke off wings. One by one, ships dropped into the ocean or slammed down into cities. We couldn't get away. Wherever we went, they chased! They more than halved our numbers! One of my friends decided we should go higher in the sky. It's colder up there, maybe it would freeze them off. But the thing is, no ship has ever gone higher than System Sky! The only ships that have flown higher are space pirate ships, and believe it or not, we are not space pirate ships! We're just a government fleet, designed to fly no higher than System Sky. But the higher we went, the beasts weakened. They let go and tumbled back to the ground. Some dragged ships with them as their tentacles refused to let go. We fired at one and it shattered. Somehow, they'd frozen solid. But so had our ships. Ice coated my wind screen. It began to crack. So I returned to the ground as fast as I could. Freezing my tail off. I could feel torpor setting in, but I had to fight off sleep. But I don't think I managed it. The last thing I remember seeing was those creatures regrouping. I picked up speed and fled, but… I think I must have fallen into torpor. Somehow… I got away."

The room fell silent as the pokemon and Annie took it all in. Cookie shuffled his feet in the silence and looked back up at Axle, still staring into his cocoa.

"You definitely did fall into torpor," said the slurpuff. "You should drink that."

Axle eyed the slurpuff, all aggression leaving his dark eyes. Then he took a sip of his drink. It appeared to visibly relax him, and he let his legs spread out across the bed.

"I recommend a warm shower, too," said Cookie.

Axle frowned. "Noted."

"I don't really know what to say about your story, Axle," said Anchor. "But it must have been terrifying."

"That's the understatement of the century."

"Nevertheless, you're safe now-"

Axle snorted and fixed him in a glare. "For how long? They're all over System! It's only a matter of time until-"

Anchor raised a paw and barked to silence him. The small emolga cowered slightly, but returned his glare with venom.

"I believe we can get out of this alive," said Anchor. "We're workin' together and if you wanna help us, be my guest. The more the merrier. Now… you said somethin' about a Zero Day model?"

"I did." Axle sipped his cocoa, keeping his eyes on Anchor's.

"Did it go down with the other ships?" Anchor asked. "If so, we might be able to retrieve it."

"Now why would you wanna do that?"

"Simple, really. They can open gateways." Anchor paused as Axle's expression twisted with confusion. "If we can send those creatures back where they came from, there ain't no need to fight them. They'll go back home, happy. Right now, they're not happy. Not all of them anyway."

Web clasped her tail to her back as Poipole fought for freedom. His voice still rang out loud and clear, however.

"No, we're not happy."

Axle jolted and looked around at the room.

Web's expression softened and she shook her head slowly. "They're not evil. They're scared."

The emolga didn't look convinced. He flashed a canine and lowered his mug to his lap.

"Is there somethin' on this ship?" he spat.

Anchor sighed and rubbed his muzzle. "We'll talk about that lat-"

"Is there somethin' on this ship?!"

"Yes!" Anchor barked. "We've got two Ultra Beasts, and they can speak. They're friendly. We've also got one tailin' us, but you clearly didn't see that when you called for help. Or you didn't care, one or the other."

"You're carrying monsters?" Axle gasped. "You're workin' with them, aren't you?"

"We're tryin' to get them home and stop the monster that's taken over Socket's mansion and killed her!" Anchor roared.

Axle's entire body stiffened. He stared back at Anchor, stunned.

"She's dead?" he asked quietly.

"It's all over the news," said Web. "I thought everyone knew, but I guess I was wrong."

Axle clutched his cocoa in both paws and looked away. "I… I've been out of touch the last couple of weeks. Drifting along, trying to survive… my computer… it's dead." He sighed and lifted a paw to rub his ears. "I thought her mansion looked creepy. I had no idea that it…"

"Well we're going to stop it," said Anchor. "You with us or are we lettin' you off at the next safe city?"

The emolga sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "I'll help."

"All right. Now… where can we find that Zero Day?"

"Right here," said Axle. "It's on my ship."

Anchor's jaw almost hit the floor. "You still have it?"

"Yes. You think I'd let it go after all the trouble we went through to find one?" Axle let out a dry chuckle. "I dunno what use it is to you, though. It's completely wrecked."

"We'll give it a go. I'm pretty good at fixin' things." Anchor pushed himself to his feet. "You get some rest. Then you can meet the rest of our little team."

The group rose to their feet and followed Anchor from the room, but Waveform kept one eye on the emolga.

"I'll be on the door," he said. "So if you need anything-"

"I need a guard?" Axle spat. "I just said I'll help you."

Anchor looked back at the decidueye. "It's okay. Leave him be."

Waveform hesitated a moment, then slinked down the corridor after Anchor.

As Web stood up to follow after Annie, Poipole drifted from her tail and looked down at the emolga. Axle squeaked and sloshed cocoa onto the duvet, but Poipole didn't react. He floated there, staring at him until the emolga trembled from ear to tail.

"Poipole!" Web called from the door. "Come on, leave him alone."

Poipole drifted backwards towards the door. "I'm not evil."

"Of course you're not, Sticky," said Annie. "You're adorable. Now let's leave Mister Squirrel alone, eh?"

Poipole looked back at Annie, waiting until she'd vanished from sight, then he turned back to Axle.

"My name is Poipole," he said. "Only Annie can call me Sticky."

He ducked from the room, leaving the trembling emolga to a somewhat fitful nap.

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 75

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Seventy Five

Macro strolled through the square for the burger van, DL keeping pace at his side. When the little van came into view, he noted the little round tables. Sat at one with a computer clasped in her paws was Defrag, her mouth turned down into a bored frown.

The mawile let out a sigh and tapped DL on the arm, motioning to one of the other many fast food mobiles. DL gave him an exasperated look and dragged him towards the lopunny's table. She pulled up a chair before he could object, leaving him with no choice but to sit down beside her.

Defrag looked up briefly and cocked an eyebrow at them. "Decided to join me eh?"

Her attention was already back on the computer. Macro trailed a claw over the plastic table and shrugged, which went unnoticed.

"So how's the human?" Defrag asked.

"No different than he was this mornin'," said Macro.

"Okay." Defrag looked up again, more pointedly this time. Meeting his eyes. "How was he this morning?"

Macro sighed again and spread his paws. "Look. Don't take this the wrong way, Digit-"

"Defrag."

Macro rolled his eyes. "But what are you still doin' here?"

The lopunny lowered her computer to the table and sat back in her chair. It creaked under her weight, but she didn't so much as bat an eyelid.

"I believe I came here on your ship," she said. "Besides, I have one of those Z-Crystal things."

She flashed it at him, as though he needed a reminder.

"That's not quite what I meant," he said. "Why didn't you go with Anchor and Time Archeops?"

"I wasn't asked." She retrieved her computer again, idly pawing through it.

An awkward silence passed between them, and Macro stared longingly at the burger menu. He fidgeted his paws, trying to gauge when would be an appropriate time to get up and place an order. But too much time had passed already.

"So," said DL. "Have you managed to use your Z-Move yet?"

"Nope." Defrag didn't look up from her computer. "I've still not decided if I want to."

"Well… maybe we could train together?" DL pawed at her ear. "I need to practice my move, anyway. Now I can remember how to use discharge…"

Defrag looked up then, fixing DL in a glare. "No offense, little pachirisu, but you've been giving me the cold shoulder for the past two weeks."

Macro jerked his head back and forth between the two girls. He cleared his throat and stood up, pointing to the van.

"I'll go get a burger then-"

"Sit!" Defrag pointed at his seat.

Macro slumped back down, a cold sweat forming under his fur.

"I'm not going to be harsh," Defrag went on, "but the pair of you are the reason I've been indecisive about this whole ordeal. If you really want me on your team, you need to prove it. Or you can find another pokemon with an ice type move. Maybe Floppy, for example?"

"Hey, the crystal was meant for you." Macro spread his paws and shrugged. "You're clearly on the team."

"I don't have a choice?"

Macro shrugged again and stuttered as he struggled to find words.

Defrag fixed her eyes back on her computer. "All right, I get it. Well, given Tracer and Widget have their own Z-Crystals, I guess I'm on board. But I'm not just doing this as a favor to you. I'm doing this because my home is under threat, and I've gotta admit I feel kind of humbled that I've been entrusted with this Z-Power. Just know that when this is over, we go our separate ways."

"Well, at least we can be civil until then, right?" asked Macro.

"You?" Defrag looked up again and laughed. "Civil?"

Macro ran a paw down his face and sighed. "I've been through a lot recently, Defrag. It's changed me."

"Hey, you got my name right." She turned back to her computer and nodded in the direction of the burger van. "Go on. Get your occa and nutpea, or whatever it is you're hooked on these days."

Macro turned to the van then looked back at DL.

"Surprise me," she said before he could even ask.

So she wasn't coming with him to the van, then. He shook his head as the pachirisu leant forward to talk to Defrag, and placed his order with the watchog.

"Listen," DL told Defrag, grabbing her attention. "I don't want any hostility. Whatever your past is, I don't care. Let's… just shove things aside and work together. It'll be easier if we get along."

"I ain't denying that." Defrag idly tapped through the news page. "Fine. We can train together. I'll get Tracer and Widget in on the deal too, given they're still stuck here. At least I'm not alone anymore, eh?"

Macro placed DL's spicy tamato burger before her and sat down with his own. A much less spicier option this time. He placed a large watmel soda between them, which DL immediately turned to before tucking into her meal.

As Macro took a bite, three figures appeared out of the crowd. Tracer and Widget followed closely by a large, grinning incineroar. As Macro watched them draw closer, he felt a blob of relish drip from his burger onto his scarf. A low groan left his throat and he deposited his burger to lick his scarf clean. In vain.

Defrag chuckled and shook her head, leaning it on one hand. "Some things never change."

DL stuffed a napkin into his paw as Tracer pulled up a seat. He eyed Macro with curiosity and pulled a silver tin from inside his trench coat. A cigar appeared in his claws which he lit with a lick of flames from between his teeth.

"Taken a change of occupation then?" Tracer asked.

"With Socket gone there ain't no bounty on my head," Macro half-growled. "So don't go tryin' anythin'-"

"I wouldn't dream of it," said Tracer. "Not while we're on the same team."

Macro's eye went to the Z-Crystal around the delphox's paw. Of course. He really needed to keep up with the new members to their

team. So much had happened since the chaos in Socket's mansion. He idly rubbed his artificial paw before returning to his burger.

"Yeah, what's this about a team?" said the incineroar. "'Cos I want in."

"You serious?" Tracer scoffed. "You're friend ended up in prison for shooting an officer! You're only with me because I've been told to keep an eye on you!"

The incineroar folded his arms. "I'd be 'ere anyway. I ain't got noplace else to go. They apprehended my ship. Flippin' fuzz."

Macro stared open mouthed at the incineroar. "Who did you shoot?"

"I didn't shoot nobody," said the huge fire type. "It were my partner, Cyph3r. Shot some empoleon guy and left him in critical care."

Macro stared up at him dumbfounded. The incineroar stuck a claw in his ear and scratched, oblivious to the mawile's stunned rage.

"He shot HeatSink?!" Macro finally barked.

The incineroar shrugged his heavy shoulders. "I don't know his name. But yeah. Got himself locked up. I weren't involved in nothin', so don't go pointin' claws at me."

Macro sighed into his claws, dropping his burger back onto his plate. A soft warmth spread through his hip, growing with intensity. Surely he'd not spilled yet more relish?

"But, of course," the incineroar went on, "'cos we're friends, they're keepin' me here as a suspect of… what were it?" He scratched his head, looking down at Tracer and Widget.

"A conspirator," said the eevee.

"Aye, that's it," said the space pirate with a grin. "Conspiritator."

"No!" Widget whined. Clearly it wasn't the first time they'd had this conversation. "Con-spi-ra-tor!"

The incineroar's eyes widened. "What did I say?"

That warmth increased to a burning heat. Macro snatched at his hip, grabbing hold of his pouch. It was in his pouch? He wrenched it open in a panic, expecting to find a damaged and leaking laser module. But instead, sat among his stray credits, sat a glowing crystal, giving off an ultra-violet light. He pulled out the black Z-Crystal, oddly cool in his paws. He looked between it and the incineroar and muttered to himself;

"You have to be kiddin' me?"

The incineroar raised an eyebrow. "What's that?"

Macro narrowed his eyes. "Do you know any dark type moves?"

"Aye!" The huge space pirate grinned from ear to ear. "Brutal swing! One of my signature moves. Gets rid of other 'mon I don't want around real quick. Why?"

Macro sighed and pinched his muzzle between two claws. He held out the Z-Crystal, not looking at the incineroar.

"This is yours," he said. "Welcome to the team… erm…"

"N0ize." The incineroar took the crystal in two claws and eyed it with a smile. "Neat! So I get to do one of them Z-Move thingies?"

"Really?!" Widget sounded much too happy. His bushy tail wagged back and forth as he hopped on his toes. "Oh man! I wanna see that one real bad! Let's try it!"

Tracer caught Macro's eye, reflecting his expression.

"This can only end badly," said the delphox.

Macro watched N0ize and Widget scamper off towards the lake. He took one final bite from his burger and rose to his feet.

"My thoughts exactly," he said, looking over at DL and Defrag. "We should probably supervise."

…

Spool City was in utter chaos. Wildcard Gamma drifted over it encased in the safety of its cloak as Matrix and Anchor desperately sought a place to land. Buildings crumbled beneath them as nihilego darted back and forth between a streak of silver. Occasionally the blur would pause, momentarily appearing bug-like before darting off to strike one of the jellyfish creatures. In the distance, electricity danced over the houses as the unmistakable bladed forms of the kartana trio sliced through the air, desperate to avoid a thorough shocking.

"Seems like a turf war," said Trojan.

"But why would they all try to occupy Spool City?" Web shook her head sadly. "System is huge! What could possibly-"

One of the buildings right below the ship exploded into rubble as a red and green hulking mass shot through the roof, tailed by a xurkitree's well-aimed discharge. The huge creature fell amid the rubble before Anchor could get a good look at it.

"My guess," said Rave, "is that something much more dangerous has left them with no choice but to concentrate in such a small area."

"Like Distortion?" Matrix suggested.

"Possibly," said Rave. "I mean… the distortion is spreading across System."

Anchor wanted to ask how on earth the blacephalon even knew that, then his eye wandered to Axle huddled in a far corner, as far from

the space pirates and Ultra Beasts as he could get without locking himself in the cargo bay. The little emolga pawed at his computer, plugged into one of the cockpit's few spare sockets. Not far from his feet lay the hulking, ruined mass of the porygon-z he'd scooped up. A few loose tools lay scattered around it. Every now and then, its one working eye would fix on one of the crew members, but it didn't move.

"How bad is this distortion gettin', Axle?" Anchor asked.

"Hard to say," said the emolga. "Drones can't get close enough. Pokemon daren't, those that do have either died or been critically injured. The latest report put the spread as far out of Seed City as the Backbone Mountains."

"And when was that reported?"

Axle shrugged his shoulders. "Yesterday? Day before? I didn't check the date. My main concern right now is getting this Zero Day unit working again."

Anchor nodded stiffly and turned back to the window. The chaos had drifted towards the ship's left. He jerked the ship to the right as a stray electric bolt skimmed the fin.

"Might I suggest something?" Waveform asked. "How about we move out of the city, disembark, then work our way back in on the ground?"

"What, and die?" Axle snorted.

"You'll be on the ship with Matrix and Trojan fixing this android," said Anchor. He turned back to the decidueye. "I'm with you on that one, Waveform. It's the best option we've got right now."

"Aye," said Matrix. "One more stray bolt and they might fry our cloak. Then we'll be a prime target."

Anchor steered the ship towards the edge of the outskirts. The squabbling Ultra Beasts thinned out the further they moved from the city. He strained his eyes on the horizon. Sockets mansion glowed beyond the mountains. Odd ultra violet rays spanned across the land. He couldn't see the effects, but in his mind they resembled the twisted land visible through the bubble surrounding Seed City. That was if the photographs were correct. What had been posted to news websites had been somewhat blurry. A quick photo shoot taken during a frantic attempt to escape.

"All right." The granbull stepped back from the controls and waved to Time Archeops. "Annie, Waveform, Web, Poipole, you're all with me. You too, Rave."

The blacephalon looked up from the Zero Day unit. Somehow, he managed to look surprised.

"You want me with you?" he asked. "I thought you might need me guarding the ship."

"Nope, I think Matrix and Trojan are fully capable. I need you to help translate," said Anchor. "And if both you and Poipole, along with Celesteela, can talk to the Ultra Beasts, it might win them to our side."

"Oh, of course. Capital idea." Rave stood up and strode after Anchor.

Axle snorted as he reached for a screwdriver to attack Zero Day's tiny screws. "Don't trust me as far as you can throw me, eh?"

Anchor decided to say nothing, leading his crew out to the hatch. Annie found a mask stuffed in her hands. She frowned down at it.

"Why are you handing me some fake beak?" she asked.

"Put it on," said Anchor as he reached for another. "Air's toxic."

Annie snorted and lifted it to her face, fumbling with the fastenings. Waveform stepped in to help her secure it around her head.

"It stinks like wet dog in here," she groaned.

"Who else wants one?" Anchor asked. "Because I've only got four, and one of them is Matrix-sized."

Waveform gave the granbull a sideways glance and shook his head, nodding to Web. The skuntank also shook her head and nudged Anchor in the leg with a claw.

"You wear one, dear," she said. "You're younger than me."

Anchor thanked her and fastened his in place. The spare one found its way into Waveform's wings. The decidueye was about to put it back until Annie wrestled it free and wrapped it around his head feathers. Muttering under his breath, Waveform adjusted it and fastened it in place, dislodging split feather shafts onto the floor.

"Right, we're goin' in." Anchor grabbed onto the ladder rung. "Follow me."

The ladder descended towards the ground with its familiar flashing sound as each neon beam shot into place. Thick yellow smog obscured Anchor's vision as he fell through it, and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust. Through the smog he could see the battling Ultra Beasts as something big chased the kartana through what remained of Spool City's rooftops. He dropped, calling out to the others to be careful. One of the kartana skimmed his back as he landed on the floor with a grunt. He quickly checked himself over, finding nothing but a close trim where the bladed Ultra Beast had clipped his fur.

Rave landed beside him, along with Annie. The others weren't far behind.

Waveform hovered in the air on his huge wings, squinting through the filter mask's green eye guards.

"I'm going to see if I can spot what the problem is," he said. "We'll need a clearer idea of why they're all squabbling over the outskirts."

Before Anchor could object, the decidueye rose higher into the sky to be lost beyond the smog cloud. Not far beyond that cloud he could see Celesteela's hulking mass seeking a place big enough for her to land.

Anchor absently checked his computer. No reception. Whatever was going on, it was taking out System's antennae across the region. That left them with no way to contact Macro or Waveform, and he'd need to rely on Wildcard Gamma's local wireless headsets. If Matrix went too far outside its range…

He decided not to dwell on that and instead waved the crew on.

A low whistle split the air, pushing Anchor's fur on end.

"Duck!" he barked, throwing himself and Annie to the floor.

Rave twisted to meet the attack head on, throwing out a flurry of shadow balls. The kartana trio doubled back to dodge them, the two outermost kartana swerving away to attack the blacephalon from both sides. He leapt into the air, causing the two small Ultra Beasts to collide with the sound of clashing blades.

"Stop!" he called. "We don't want to fight you! We are friends!"

The kartana made a slicing noise as they swerved away to strike him again. Rave leapt back, firing out shadow ball after shadow ball in an attempt to slow them down. Each attack fell short, landing just before them, creating enough of a blast to disorient the three smaller creatures.

Poipole swerved in from the top. "Stop! Listen to us! We just want to talk!"

"Yes!" Rave said again. "Please tell us what has you all so upset!"

One of the kartana reared up, hovering just before Rave. It rubbed its forelegs together swiftly, creating a sharp metallic screech. Rave appeared taken aback. He placed one foot behind him, staring at the small kartana.

"War?" he gasped, his lights turning pale. "Over what?"

The other two kartana hovered just behind their leader. It rubbed its limbs together again. A softer metallic screech, like someone sharpening a blade.

Rave glanced behind them at a dumbfounded Anchor. "Trojan was right about a turf war. They're trying to defend their new home."

"But why?" Anchor stepped towards them. "What could-"

The kartana flew into a frenzy, scraping their limbs together in a deafening screech. Anchor placed his paws over his ears.

"Cut that out!" he roared.

"Please!" Rave lifted his paws. "One at a time!"

The lead kartana spun to his allies, clanging his paper-thin blades together. The other two fell silent. A deafening silence. The lead kartana turned back to Rave and Poipole, and slowly began to scrape its limbs.

Rave nodded slowly, exchanging glances with Poipole as the kartana explained itself in a baffling array of scrapes, screeches and clangs.

"It's the nihilego," said Poipole. "They're trying to take over Spool City. And if that's not bad enough, the xurkitree are desperate for

electricity. The kartana have been pushed from their lair."

The kartana went on, each blade swipe becoming more violent like an angry warlord throwing out a pre-battle speech.

"And then the others," said Poipole. "Small pokemon brought down their new lair with water and ice, before the kartana drove them away. The water was turned red with their blood."

"The water dwellers," Web gasped.

"Then two bugs showed up," Poipole continued translating, "destroying each lair the kartana move to."

"But why?" asked Anchor. "Why squabble over a hole like this?"

The kartana almost seemed to shrug as it rubbed its limbs together.

Rave shook his head sadly. "They do not know."

Waveform landed silently beside them, almost causing Annie to squeak with surprise. He dusted down his wings and glanced back over his shoulder. Then he eyed the kartana warily.

"All I can see back there is a massacre," he said. "Distortion's reach hasn't even touched Gear Village yet. The water is running red. Fish pokemon are lying dead or electrocuted. I assume in their attempt to eradicate the fisheries."

"So all this has happened because of the rebellion?" Annie gasped.

"Don't give yourself too much credit," Waveform snorted. "The very buildings beyond the outskirts look like they've been eaten. I took a quick fly over to Proxy City. It looks like something is eating the place. Not merely destroying it. The water dwellers have simply been caught up in something unexpected. An unfortunate situation that we can't blame ourselves for."

The kartana's screeching and scratching filled the air, rising into a crescendo. Everyone followed their eyes to the horizon. Two jellyfish pokemon scrambled through the sky, firing glittering rocks behind them. There was something else tailing them. Something big.

"Is that Celesteela?" Annie gasped. "Why's she fightin' them?!"

"It isn't Celesteela." Waveform's voice wavered.

The huge shape became clearer. A round, hulking body with pincers that snapped and bit at the nihilego's limbs. One screeched loudly as its tentacle found itself in the monster's grasp. Inky blood splurted out to the sides, drenching the creature's slimy pincer, and peppering the rubble. A huge mouth opened in the monstrosity's gut, and the nihilego found itself hurtled towards it as the pincer retracted inside.

"Well!" Annie tapped Anchor on the shoulder and took a step back. "I think we now know what's been eatin' the buildings. I say there's now only one thing we can do."

She turned on her heel and rushed away from the monster with a cry of 'run!'

Waveform took off after her, firing his arrows at the monster to cover their backs.

The nihilego's terrified shrieks deafened them. The one remaining fired rocks and sludge at the creature, desperate to rescue its friend. The three kartana drifted back and forth, slicing their blades, undecided on whether to follow Annie or fight back.

Poipole drifted down towards Web, his mental voice wavering.

"I don't know what it is," he said. "I've never seen one before."

"I believe it's a monster known as Guzzlord," said Rave. "I've only heard about it in the legends my trainer used to tell me. It eats anything in its path."

"Then what are we doing just lookin' at it?" Anchor roared. "Take Annie's advice and run!"

Anchor turned and rushed after Annie, pushing Web and Poipole on before him. Waveform had dragged her down a narrow alleyway towards another street, rather than out of Spool City entirely. Anchor glanced back to make sure everyone was ahead of him. The kartana slipped past, following the pokemon into the alley. Anchor was about to turn and follow them, but his jaw dropped. Rave was watching the nihilego's frantic attempts. Its friend was long gone, its screeches stopped. The only sounds were the nihilego's protests and battlecries, and the guzzlord's munching jaws. It turned its chomping limbs towards the lone nihilego.

Rave launched himself onto the rooftops in one swift spring. Then he leapt to the nihilego, grabbing it in his arms. With a graceful twist, he dodged the guzzlord's snapping maws. With another spring, he vanished between the buildings.

Anchor shook his head sharply and slipped into the alley, joining Web and Poipole.

"She went this way." Web grabbed his arm and dragged him after her. "Where's Rave?"

"I don't know!" Anchor growled. "Crazy goof leapt to rescue that other nihilego. He's somewhere in all this chaos!"

He darted past them to lead them round the twists and turns of Spool City's alleyways. Annie and Waveform were waiting for them, and when they appeared, Waveform took to the sky to scout them a path.

"See if you can spot Rave!" Anchor told him.

Waveform rose higher, his keen eyes searching through the smog. "I see him."

No sooner had the words left Waveform's beak, Rave sprang from a back alley with the nihilego still clutched in his arms. The guzzlord rose above them, its slimy tongue stretching its snapping pincer after the blacephalon. Celesteela's eerie scream filled the air and she dropped from the sky, landing atop the huge Ultra Beast. She hit her target with an almighty crash, the very ground trembling with the impact and scattering rubble from the ruined buildings. Anchor dodged to the side to avoid falling rocks as he scrambled after Rave. Another one of Celesteela's screams joined a bellowing roar from the guzzlord. Her bamboo neck stretched up above the ruins and one of her cannons crashed down on the monster flailing under her weight.

The nihilego's tinkling cry was akin to sobbing amongst all the chaos. It didn't even try to leave Rave's arms as he carried it to safety. Anchor had almost caught up with him when another rock tumbled down, cutting him off. The granbull kicked out at it, roaring with frustration.

Celesteela screeched as her huge body toppled sideways towards Anchor. The guzzlord let out an almighty roar as it pushed itself free, its limb groping for her face. She aimed a cannon flash at its gut, sending it flying away from her. But yet more debris filled the alley, leaving Anchor and his crew with no choice but to take a different path.

A flash of fire drew his eye to the rooftops. Rave bounced on top of it, flames flickering away from his free paw like a flare. He turned and led them down a narrow alley with Waveform calling directions to those stranded on the ground.

The kartana zipped on ahead of them, calling out in their own peculiar language. They followed tightly to Waveform's path, spreading out over the crew to keep a close eye on them. One of them performed a corkscrew above their heads, deflecting a stray pebble back into the fray.

The guzzlord's roars grew with intensity as it fought back against Celesteela. Its long pincer tongue struck the buildings ahead of them, causing Anchor to do a double take. When had it moved ahead of them? Rave hadn't prepared for it. He lost his footing, dropping towards the floor with a yell.

"Rave!" Anchor roared.

A red streak shot down after the blacephalon. Then a shrill buzz cut the air. The red creature manifested above the dust and debris, clutching both Rave and the nihilego in a pair of muscular arms. It darted back towards them with surprising speed for its size. Then it curved away, leading them away from the combat towards Proxy Boulevard.

Waveform trimmed his wings and swerved after it, along with the kartana. Anchor didn't even think twice. He led the group after the Ultra Beast, racing down Proxy Boulevard. Celesteela's screams and the guzzlord's roars shook the city. Rocks and other debris struck the ground around them, only adding to the chaos. Anchor squinted through the dust cloud. The red creature was just ahead of them, moving into Proxy City. The granbull picked up speed, glancing over his shoulder to make sure everyone was still with him. Then they entered the next city, leaving behind the warring Ultra Beasts.

The red bug-like creature's shrill, buzzing whine fizzled out as it zipped into the gaping door of a ruined building. Anchor came to a stop just outside it, eyeing the opening with a growing suspicion. Waveform landed almost silently beside him, drawing his eye.

"This is where it's lead us," he said. "I say we go inside."

The kartana took his words as a sign to do so, zipping in over their heads. Anchor ducked instinctively, raising a paw to shield his mohawk.

"Well I ain't standin' around like a damp squid." Annie pushed between them, marching into the building. "It's dangerous out here."

Waveform shook his head and glanced at Anchor, before following after Annie. The granbull gestured to the rest of the pokemon and trailed after Waveform.

The building was made a lot smaller inside by the sheer amount of rubble from the caved in floor above. A few Ultra Beasts occupied it, beside the bug creature, Rave and the frightened nihilego. Two more nihilego drifted above them among the remains of the rafters. About five xurkitree clung to the walls, their electricity lighting up the dim room with all the efficiency of a strobing florescent kitchen light. Against the far wall leant another bug-like creature, only this one appeared feminine. She stood with slender arms folded over a lithe body. A long, papery shell hung down her back, which rustled with every slight movement.

Rave almost leapt for joy when he saw the space pirates. He waved at the large red bug to draw their eyes to it. Four legs, two muscular arms, and a long proboscis. Its shrill buzzing had stopped as its wings lay stationary behind it.

"This is my new friend Buzzwole!" said Rave.

The huge creature lifted both of his arms and flexed. Green veins protruded from his exoskeleton as his internal muscles bulged. His tiny eyes smiled down at the space pirates, nullifying his intimidating appearance.

"Well, erm…" Anchor scratched his nose as his eyes drifted over the other occupants once more. "It's nice to meet you?"

The feminine bug met his eyes then almost seemed to tut, diverting her gaze as she flicked her shell back from her head with one paw. It fluttered like silk.

A shrill buzz filled the room and all eyes went back to Buzzwole. It wasn't his wings that were making it this time. It came from his proboscis reminiscent of a kazoo. Once he'd fallen silent once more, Rave took the opportunity to translate.

"He says this is the safest place at the moment. The guzzlord has destroyed most of the cities, and the distortion is spreading across System, driving everyone out. Those that stay behind get sucked in. For now everyone has retreated here. The turf war will be put on hold until the guzzlord has moved on."

"Turf war?" Annie made an obscene noise with her lips and waved a hand at Buzzwole. "No need! We're here to fight the distortion and get y'all back home!"

Anchor lifted a paw to drag her attention, but the tinkling from the nihilego and the xukitree's increased light display caused him to take a step back. The kartana zipped back and forth above him, clashing their limbs together in a desperate bid for silence.

Buzzwole leapt into the middle of the room, flexing his arms in various positions. A few kazoo toots quickly resolved the situation, and order fell over the room once more.

A final flex. Eyes fixed on Annie.

Rave waved a paw towards her. "He says to continue."

Annie opened her mouth, but Anchor silenced her with a paw on her shoulder. He looked the buzzwole in the eye and cleared his throat.

"Annie's right," he said. "We are tryin' to get you all back home, but we need your help. Distortion is wrecking our world, and an android called BackDoor is the reason you're all here in the first place, including Distortion."

The xurkitree chattered among themselves, then turned back to Anchor.

"They say they fought some creatures that opened their world," said Rave.

"That might have been to do with him," said Anchor. "Anyway, we've got a friend workin' on our ship to make a device that can open a gate back to your own world. Then you'll be free, and away from all this… well let's face it, our world is pretty strange to you, right?"

Buzzwole looked down at Rave, then up at the other Ultra Beasts. The nihilego tinkled amongst themselves, while the xurkitree chattered on in a series of words drowned in static that Anchor couldn't understand. Buzzwole flexed one arm, drawing the room into silence, then smiled down at Anchor.

A few little toots.

"He does want to go back," said Rave. "And so does everyone else."

Toot kazoo patoot.

Rave shrugged. "He says the berries here taste weird and everyone looks at him funny."

Annie folded her arms and nodded. "I know that feel, bro."

Buzzwole stretched a fist out towards her. She returned it with a fist-bump of her own. Then he flexed.

"That's all well and good," said Anchor. "But it ain't just you guys. It's all of you. Including the guzzlord. You all need to go back, so we have to… well… gather you all together-"

The nihilego rose into a tinkling panic, and the frightened one zipped behind Rave, wrapping its tentacles around his waist. He tried to pry it free, but it shook its head and let out a strange, screaming squeal.

"That isn't going to be easy."

Anchor looked up with a start. It was the female bug that had spoken. She unfurled her arms and placed one paw on her hip.

"If you want to send that guzzlord back with us all," she said slowly, "then you're going to have to tame it."

"Tame it?" Web squeaked. "You've seen what it does! How are we meant to tame it if Celesteela is struggling to fight it?"

Poipole drifted back and forth in the room, eyes drifting to each and every one of the Ultra Beasts as he sucked noisily on his toxic tank. He exchanged glances with Rave and the two nodded.

"Nihilego," they said in unison.

The terrified nihilego screamed once more, and the two above them flew into a panicked frenzy.

"Hear us out!" shouted Poipole. "Please!"

Buzzwole honked up at them, flexing his massive arms. When they didn't quiet, he flapped his wings. Anchor cowered with his paws over his ears, trying to stifle the shrill buzzing before it tore through his eardrums. The nihilego calmed down, drifting back to their rafters.

"Just listen," said Poipole. "You have the ability to control whatever you inject your toxins into. Right? So if one of you can take over the guzzlord, then we can try and reason with it."

"That's a nice idea and all," said the female bug. "But the nihilego can't even get close to that guzzlord. They've already tried to neutralize it, and look what's happened! It's slaughtered hundreds of them!"

All eyes went back to the three nihilego.

"This is all that's left?" Anchor choked.

"Not quite," said the bug. "They're relatively scattered, but their numbers are few."

Poipole looked up at her. "Pheramosa… that's your name right?"

"Call me what you want." She shrugged. "My trainer never bothered to nickname me."

"Well if you help, too," Poipole went on, "and Buzzwole… you could weaken the guzzlord enough for the nihilego to get close and take over it. Even if you only distracted it. Your attacks are effective against the guzzlord."

"Really?" Anchor frowned at Poipole. "What typing is it?"

"In your terms," said Rave, drawing the granbull's eye, "I'd say it's both dark and dragon type."

Waveform folded his wings and nodded. "In that case, it would be pretty effective against Distortion, too. If we can get this guzzlord on our side, I'd say we'd have a pretty powerful ally."

"But how do we do that?" asked Web. "That thing eats buildings."

Waveform's eyes lit up through his mask as he grinned. "Exactly."

…

It took a while to rally the Ultra Beasts together with enough confidence to take on the guzzlord. As they trailed back to Spool City, each step brought on more anxiety. Celesteela's eerie screams rivaled with the guzzlord's roars. The city buildings had been flattened wherever they had fought, and long glowing vines impaled buildings, pulsing with light. They also covered the guzzlord's body, slowly draining his strength, yet he fought on with as much vigor as he had been doing. Dust choked the lungs of any who weren't wearing masks. Poipole, now without his tank hindering his attacks, spat poison from his proboscis to clear them, aiming it well away from his friends. But his breaths came in wheezes like a set of punctured bellows.

Anchor stopped them just inside an alley, with a clear view of the warring titans. He turned to Buzzwole and Pheramosa and nodded.

"All right, you two. You know what to do."

The two insectoid Ultra Beasts shot from the alley, Buzzwole's wings creating his shrill buzz and drawing the guzzlord's attention. Celesteela cuffed the dragon over the head with one of her cannons. He caught the other in his tongue pincers, dragging it into his mouth.

Buzzwole zipped past him, striking him with his wings' sound waves. He lurched to the side as Pheramosa lunged at the dragon, her slender limbs piercing his thick hide.

With three Ultra Beasts to deal with, the tides of battle began to change. The guzzlord pivoted to focus his attention on one of the beasts, leaving himself open to attack from the other two. But it would only take one of them falling in battle to turn the fight back in his favor. If they were going to win this, they had to act fast.

Anchor shot from the alley with Rave in tow. The granbull nodded to Rave and the blacephalon fired off a volley of shadow balls, dragging the guzzlord's attention away from Pheramosa. The slender bug managed to land another lunge right on the guzzlord's left tongue pincer. It retracted back into his mouth with such speed it knocked her off balance. She lay sprawled right beneath his flailing feet. Her eyes widened with fear as his left foot came crashing down towards her head. Buzzwole zipped towards her, yanking her out of the way, just as the massive dragon came crashing back down.

Celesteela leapt into the air and heavy-slammed on top of him, giving the two insects the chance to flee to a safer distance and re-think their strategy.

Web's team came in from the opposite side to Anchor. Poipole fired gunk shots at the guzzlord's other tongue pincer. It didn't phase Celesteela, who managed to get in the way of a couple of the attacks. But it was enough to cause the guzzlord's tongue to recoil

with disgust. The dragon's flailing increased as he levered Celesteela off him with his small arms. Then, with an almighty roar, the bamboo cannon found herself careening away from him. Her leech seed vines snapped from the dragon's body, releasing him from the energy draining attack.

"Drat," said Anchor. "That would've been useful if it had held for longer."

His eye went back to the alley. Several silver arrows arced towards the battle, striking the guzzlord on the back. As he turned, Buzzwole and Pheramosa leapt in to strike him from behind. He turned again, flailing his tongues, pincers snapping. Electricity coursed through his body and his limbs jerked. He thrashed up and down, stamping his feet as he dislodged one of the xurkitree. It skittered away along with its companions, firing more electricity. His tongues lashed out, snapping at anything that moved. Pheramosa grimaced as one of them fastened over her leg. The kartana leapt to her aid, slashing at his tongue. Green blood leaked from it and the guzzlord howled. Pheramosa slipped free before the limb retracted back into his mouth. In a fury, she lunged at the other one, eliciting a pained roar from the huge beast.

Another leech seed erupted from the ground, moving with Celesteela's eerie cry. It wrapped around the guzzlord's legs, staggering his movements.

Anchor waved a fist at the sky and the three nihilego descended. Shining rocks and gunk shots peppered the guzzlord, while Buzzwole and Pheramosa added to the confusion. His huge tongues lashed out like fists, and a streak of red careened back from him as Buzzwole was deflected like a pebble. He struck the wall beside Anchor, sliding down it in a daze. He shook his head, buzzed and flexed, then shot back into the battle. He intersected a falling nihilego, giving it a moment to catch its breath before it drifted back into the air to launch more rocks.

The timid nihilego dropped from between its friends, landing atop the guzzlord's tiny head. It stuck its tentacles into his body, piercing his thick hide. The dragon thrashed and roared, struggling to break free from the leech seed as the vines climbed up his body. Those that tangled his limbs were torn in an instant as he reached up to claw the nihilego from his head.

Slow pulses spread down the nihilego's tentacles as toxins flooded the dragon's body. Then the strength left him as he slumped to the floor in a spasming heap.

"Good grief." Anchor marched towards the dazed guzzlord, joining his allies as they gathered around it. "He put up a fight."

Celesteela let out a cry that Anchor didn't need a translator for. He took it as a 'You aren't kidding.'

He reached up and patted the huge creature on her metal cannon. "Thanks for helpin' us out."

She returned the gesture, almost knocking Anchor face first into the guzzlord.

"Our nihilego friend is growing tired," said Rave. "I think we need to work fast."

"All right," said Anchor. "Tell him exactly what's goin' on. We need his help and co-operation if we're gonna save this world. His reward, he gets to eat a flippin' mansion."

Rave leant forward, reciting exactly what the other Ultra Beasts had been told. The state of System. The reason the guzzlord had been dragged into it in the first place. At the mention of the mansion, the guzzlord reacted. Although Anchor thought that might have been more to do with the nihilego's weakening hold.

A few grunts came from the dragon's gaping mouth. His tongues twitched as they snapped idly at the air.

"Huh." Rave stood up straight and shrugged his paws. "He doesn't know why he should help us given we've ruined his dinner."

"Seriously?" Anchor snorted. "He doesn't see the problem here? Destroying our home and taking innocent lives?"

"If I were to put it into terms you would understand," said Rave, "you have herbivores. Carnivores. Omnivores. Well… the guzzlord species are very much omnomnomnivores."

"This is no time for jokes!" Anchor spat.

"I wasn't joking!"

Annie wriggled between them and leant forward, so close she was almost eye to eye with the guzzlord.

"Annie! What are you-" Web's gasp cut off as Waveform pulled her back to leap to the girl's aid.

"Oi!" Annie said, her voice making the dragon flinch. "You fail to understand us, Omnom. That mansion is like… a gourmet meal! You help us, you get to eat the best, most top-grade buildin' in this entire universe! These pebbles are like… I dunno… morsels in comparison!"

The guzzlord's eyes widened slightly and he pushed himself up on one of his tiny arms. The nihilego's pulses weakened as it trembled in its efforts to keep the guzzlord under control.

A deep rumble came from the dragon, but its eyes never left Annie's.

"Oh wow." Rave turned his head to look at Annie. "He asks why we didn't tell him that before."

Annie shrugged. "We kinda did."

"But you didn't put it in those terms," Rave quickly translated. "You've made the mansion sound like a real delight."

The guzzlord struggled to his feet, depositing the nihilego. More rumbling.

"If he gets to eat this mansion," said Rave, "then he's game."

"All right." Annie pointed a finger at the guzzlord.

He took a small step back, almost squashing the nihilego. It zipped to the side with a squeal.

"If you're helpin'," Annie went on, "then all of these-" She circled a finger above and around her, "are your allies! We are not food. We will not be mistaken for food. This world is a meat-free-zone! Capiche?"

A small growl, slightly disappointed.

"Capiche," said Rave.

Annie beamed at the dragon and nodded. "Right then. So I guess it's back to the ship?"

The guzzlord growled again.

"No, the ship is not food!" Annie snapped.

The guzzlord's limbs slumped as he deflated. He let out another, pathetic growl.

"Fine, I'll get Cookie to make you some pancakes," she said. "Get a wiggle on, Omnom, we've got a world to save, and you've got a mansion to eat."

Annie herded the guzzlord ahead of her while everyone else watched in a stunned silence.

"Did I just witness that?" Anchor asked.

Waveform sheathed his arrows. "She has a way with words."

"Clearly!" Rave cleared his throat and glanced at Anchor. "Why isn't she heading this crew?"

Anchor shook himself into shape and trotted after her. "I need to tell her that dragon is flying behind the ship! Everyone else on board for the next part of the plan!" He paused to point at Celesteela. "Keep an eye on him, all right?"

Celesteela looked down and sighed.

Rave patted her on the cannon. "Don't worry, old girl. It's just a short flight to the distortion."

…

Yeah, I've had a lot of fun with the Ultra Beasts XD

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 76

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D This story is almost at its end. Four more weeks to go!

Chapter Seventy Six

Macro leant against a metal storage crate beside DL, arms crossed as he watched Wildcard Gamma pull back into Cyan City's docks. Beyond the ship drifted two huge Ultra Beasts, one of which sent chills down his spine. The odd bamboo creature didn't look anywhere near as threatening, instead focusing all her attention on the hulking monstrosity beside her. There seemed to be some sort of conversation going on, resulting in the occasional disappointed growl from the huge mouth in the big beast's gut.

The ship's hatch whirred open, followed by Anchor dropping onto the docks. He was swiftly followed by three kartana, the sight of which made Macro's blood turn to ice. The rest of his crew followed close behind, trailed by Poipole and a jaunty looking creature Macro assumed was one of the new Ultra Beasts. It let out a telepathic whistle.

"Jolly nice city, this one, eh?" The creature elbowed Anchor in the hip.

"Aye." Anchor waved towards the mawile. "Right this way."

The crew made their way towards Macro, sans Annie. The human girl stood with her arms crossed, looking up at the two larger Ultra Beasts drifting outside the docks. Mainly at the black, draconic creature.

"Oi, Annie!" Anchor barked. "You joinin' us?"

"No, I'm watchin' this guy," Annie called back over her shoulder. "Make sure he don't go and eat the entire city, an' all that jazz."

"Celesteela's got that job, dear," said Web softly.

Celesteela gave a soft yet somewhat disgruntled scream. Annie nodded and waved at the bamboo creature.

"All right, you're bigger'n me anyway." Annie turned to her crewmates. "But you know where I am if he gets outta hand, right?"

Celesteela visibly sighed.

The jaunty looking Ultra Beast paused before Macro and waved an arm in an elegant bow. "You must be Macro! Allow me to introduce myself. I am Rave, a blacephalon from a little island called Sparkle Grove."

"Erm…" Macro stuttered a little and stretched out a paw. "Pleased to meet you?"

Rave didn't appear concerned by the space pirate's nervousness. Instead, he took his paw and gave it a hearty shake.

Macro released the blacephalon and his eyes went to the kartana.

One of them drifted towards him, causing Macro to take a step back. But it didn't advance any further. Instead, it rubbed its blades together, creating a soft grating sound.

Rave let out a thoughtful noise. "Allow me to translate. It says it's sorry." He paused as the kartana continued its grating and clanging. "And it believes it speaks for its allies when it says it is truly glad to see you are okay."

Another one of the kartana began clattering its blades.

"Your world hasn't been making things easy for the kartana," Rave went on. "They thought you were there to hurt them, so they defended themselves. They are sorry for all misunderstanding and hope you can work together to rid your world of the evil that has consumed it."

Macro absently pawed at his ribs. "Well… I'm no stranger to misunderstandings." He smiled. "If they can set it aside, then so can I."

The lead kartana dragged one arm over the other, creating a swooshing noise that sounded a lot like a sigh of relief.

Macro cocked an eyebrow at Anchor. "So these are all the beasts you recruited?"

"Not at all," said Anchor. "We found a whole host of Ultra Beasts. They're off finding the stragglers, and will meet us just outside Seed City tomorrow evenin'."

"Really?" Macro's eyes widened and he let his arms hang at his sides.

"Aye." Anchor grinned. "There's a couple of newbies still on board, actually. We found one of Socket's soldiers driftin' about System Sky."

Macro's jaw dropped at that, but before he could retort, Anchor lifted a paw and continued.

"He had one of those Zero Day units. Turns out it can open up gateways, so we're gonna use it. He's gettin' help from a xurkitree he's nicknamed Sparky."

"I still think it's cliche," said Annie.

Anchor ignored her. "So how are things holdin' up here?"

Macro ran his mechanical paw down his face. "Hang on. I'm still trying to process all that."

DL placed a paw on his shoulder. "What's worrying you? I doubt the xurkitree is just going to damage your ship."

"Not gonna lie, the thought crossed my mind." Macro pressed his paw over his mouth and stared past Anchor at the giant wishiwashi. "And one of Socket's soldiers? Well…" He sighed and dropped his paw. "I guess he ain't exactly workin' for her anymore."

Web narrowed her eyes at the mawile. "We can't exactly discriminate, can we? We're all in the same boat."

"Ship," said Annie. "It's a ship."

The skuntank shook her head and moved away. "I'll go and find Zip. He'll want to be included."

"About that." Macro's words froze her in her tracks and all eyes went to the mawile. He sighed. "You'll want to see for yourselves."

He led them back to the hospital in silence. He couldn't find any words, and didn't want to get them any more worried than they already were. They had two Z-Crystal users, Zip and Switch, and both of them weren't in any state to use them.

When they reached the hospital, Defrag was exiting it. Macro wasn't surprised. It had been her turn to try and help Switch recover his memories and re-learn 'brave bird'.

"Any joy?" Macro asked as he caught her eye.

She shook her head and slipped past him, turning her attention to her computer.

The group finally came to a stop outside a private room. Macro spotted an azumarill nurse doubled over Zip's water bowl. It had been removed from his mechanical legs. When Macro opened the door, the goldeen's face lit up in a beaming smile.

"You're all back!" he cheered.

"Of course we are, little fish!" Annie rushed to his bowl and crouched beside it. "And we've got a whole army to help us fight off Distortion."

Zip sank to the bottom of his bowl, pouting out his bottom lip. "That nasty dragon really threw a spanner in the works, huh?"

"I'll say!" said Rave. "A right party pooper, that one."

The goldeen spotted the Ultra Beast and a stream of bubbles left his gaping mouth in a gasp.

"That is so cool!" he wagged his tail, pushing himself up against the glass. "You look amazing! What can you do?"

"Well, I can make explosions." Rave rubbed the back of his sparkly head. "But I've been told not to do that indoors."

"And rightly so," said Anchor. He turned back to Zip. "So… what's the situation here then?"

Macro waved a paw and slumped on the edge of the bed, prompting the nurse to explain. She'd been too distracted by the blacephalon and had dropped her Clipboard. She retrieved it and scanned over it, keeping a cautious eye on Rave.

"I know you had this goldeen's best interests at heart," she said, pausing to look at Annie and Web. "But those wounds he received at the fishery… they never healed properly. He ideally needed to be in clean river water."

"But it's fine!" said Zip. "I'll get better, and I can help you!"

"You'll be doing no such thing, young 'mon," said the azumarill. "You need a month's worth of antibiotics and a lot of rest, or…" She paused and shook her head, nodding towards the door.

The group followed her into the hallway, leaving Zip protesting in his bowl. After the door had closed, the nurse leant against the wall and looked at each of them in turn.

"If that goldeen doesn't get the rest he needs," she said, "he's going to die."

Web gasped and clasped a paw over her mouth. Annie's eyes went back to the door, her expression unreadable. Waveform placed a paw on her shoulder, but she didn't appear to notice.

"Well that's not exactly good news, is it?" said Rave, lights turning a subdued blue.

"No, it's not," said the azumarill. "Like I said, you had his best interests. If you'd released him back into the river, he'd have been caught again in no time. With those wounds, he wouldn't have been able to swim efficiently. And from what he told me, he also had no family to go back to. So… either way, it wouldn't have gone in his favour. If I were in your situation, I'd have done exactly the same thing."

Waveform sighed and rubbed his head feathers. "I should have flown further out for cleaner water."

"It wouldn't have made much difference," said the nurse. "The air in Spool City would have poisoned the water in a matter of hours. The issue isn't just the toxins, however. His wounds have become very infected. He needs regular antibiotics and a lot of rest. His water has to be changed daily. You can't do that on the battlefield. And I will be honest with you, there's a fifty/fifty chance he'll even see out the full course of medicine."

"What does that mean?" asked Annie.

Web rose onto her hind legs and pulled Annie aside by her shoulder. A whispered conversation passed between them, and Macro felt his stomach tie in knots.

DL looked up at him and placed a paw on his arm. Anchor caught his eye and the mawile shrugged.

"He's just a kid," said Macro. "He doesn't deserve this."

Anchor nodded sadly. "He's also got a lot of fight in him." He paused and smirked at Macro. "Kinda reminds me of you."

Macro swallowed audibly and hugged his paws over his torso. He thought he saw the Fairium-Z sparkle in the corner of his eye.

"Let me back in." Annie pulled herself away from Web and marched back to the door. "I need to talk to him."

Web grimaced. "Annie, I'm not sure-"

"He'll listen to me," said Annie. "He's always listened to me."

"And what are you going to tell him?" Waveform looked down at her, his wings crossed. He slipped between her and the door, but she batted him away.

"I'm gonna tell him exactly what he needs to hear," she said. "That he needs to rest and get better. We've got his back in this rebellion. He doesn't have to fight it any more!"

"No."

Zip's voice was muffled by the door, but everyone looked back at it. Annie twisted the handle and pushed it open, narrowly missing Zip's bowl. The goldeen looked up at them, panting from the exertion of nudging his bowl across the floor.

Web slumped her shoulders and shook her head. "Oh, Zip… You've been told to rest!"

"I'm not resting!" he shouted. "I'm done resting. I want to help! You said I could help, that we'd change System! We'll I want to help make a difference!"

Annie crouched down beside him, peering into his bowl. "You have made a difference. That rebellion wouldn't have been started without you. You also helped me find friends!"

"But the rebellion has to stop," said Zip. "Because of Distortion. I want to help you beat it so the water dwellers' fight can continue."

"You're not doing anything of the sort!" said the nurse.

A rapid water gun narrowly missed the azumarill's ear. She lifted a paw and squeaked with surprise. Zip poked his head out of the bowl, scowling at her.

"See? I can fight!" he said. "I'm tired of you telling me to rest when I've got a war to fight! My war isn't in this bowl. I don't care if I'm wounded, or sick! I want to help my friends to beat Distortion! I even have my own Z-Crystal, and I want to use it!"

Macro looked down at his own Z-Crystal. It was still sparkling. He thought he could see Solgaleo's eyes looking back at him. Nodding.

Macro lowered his arm and looked up at the nurse. "Let him fight."

"What?" The nurse, Web and Waveform all looked at him, stunned.

"We need him," said Macro. "And let's face it. What statement would it make if a water dweller helped defeat Distortion and save System?" He grinned down at the goldeen. "Not exactly useless, eh?"

Zip beamed and fluttered his tail fins. "You really want me to help?"

"I demand it!" said Macro. "You're part of our crew, right? But!" He lifted a claw. "Until we leave, you take your medicine. And we'll bring enough with us. Can't have you falling before we reach the battlefield."

Zip grinned widely and splashed with glee. "You've got it, Captain! I'll be of great help, you'll see!"

The azumarill blanched and fixed Macro in a glare. "I have you know you're stepping on toes. I can't allow this! And I'm sure Jumper will have something to say about this, too!"

"Oh, that he will."

Macro's spine tingled and he looked back at the frogadier. Jumper leant against the wall and smiled down at Zip.

"As you can see, Governor." The nurse waved her paw towards the goldeen. "He's in no fit state to fight."

"No, I'm with Macro on this one." Jumper's words made the nurse squeal with surprise.

"But…" she stuttered. "Governor, please… !"

"It would definitely make a statement," said Jumper. "And if he can splash in his bowl, I think he's got enough energy to fight. Provided he's on the sidelines." The frogadier's eyes went to Zip and Time Archeops.

"Sidelines?" Zip whined. "I want to help!"

"And you can." Jumper crouched before his bowl. "But you're a fish out of your natural environment. Sure, that water bowl allows you to do more on land than any other water dweller, but you can't get away quickly in it. And if it were to be damaged, you'd be stranded without water. That could be disastrous in your condition."

Zip's lips turned into a frown and he diverted his eyes.

"Don't worry about him." Annie placed a hand on Zip's bowl, beaming at the frogadier. "I've got him covered, he won't get hurt under my watch! Besides, he can cover my back. Right, little fish?"

Zip gave her a weak smile. "You've got it. No one's gonna get past me. Right?"

Annie nodded, causing Zip to beam once more.

"Very well." Jumper stood up and crossed his arms. "But you come straight back here, and like Macro said, you take your medicine."

Zip saluted with a fin.

Jumper nodded and turned back to the nurse. The azumarill threw her arms in the air, almost tossing her Clipboard free across the room.

"Oh, dash it all!" she said. "You come in here and overrule my-"

Jumper put a finger to her lips to silence her. "Let him have this one, ma'am. He'll be right back here before you know it."

The nurse looked between the space pirates and Jumper, then shook her head and sighed. "Fine! Two days. You have two days!"

She marched from the room, shoving past Macro as she muttered to herself. He watched her leave, then turned back to Annie and her crew.

"We need to be on my ship in three hours," he said. "Then we'll head to our meeting place with the Ultra Beasts. Anchor?"

The granbull turned to look at him and cocked an eyebrow.

"You stay with these guys and find Tracer and his two friends," said Macro. "I'm gonna visit Switch and see how he's gettin' on."

Anchor tapped him on the back and turned to talk to Zip. Macro tugged his scarf about himself and left the room with DL at his side. A small little note played from her belt pouch and she pulled out a small pocket computer. He raised an eyebrow at it, wondering if she'd picked it up during the aftermath of their run-in with Distortion.

"I'll have to meet you in there," she said, popping it back into her pocket. "I need to run and get something."

He nodded, curiosity gnawing at him. She trotted away towards the reception, leaving him beside the elevator.

It didn't take him long to get to Switch's private room. The human lay sprawled on his bed with his back against the wall, fidgeting with his transformer watch. He looked up when Macro entered, but there was no smile on his face.

"How are you doin'?" Macro asked.

Switch snorted and looked away from him. "Still dealing with not being fifteen anymore. The doctors here don't even know how old I am. Pretty obvious humans don't exist here, isn't it? Every time I look in the mirror, I just think 'Wow, I look like my dad.' I've even got the odd grey hair."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," said Macro.

Switch threw his arms in the air in exasperation. "I've lost about half of my life! What happened to the other fifteen years?"

"You spent them in System," said Macro. "We're tryin' to help you remember it all, okay? But I'm sorry. I don't know what happened to you, or who your friends are. All I know is you're some goofy guy who's everybody's friend. Even mine, and boy I don't deserve it."

Switch snorted and looked back down at his watch. "You make it sound like you're some kind of scum."

Those words stabbed like a dagger.

Macro hugged himself and leant back against the wall. "Well, I'm tryin' to change."

"So I was right then?"

Macro looked up at him, meeting one of his golden eyes. "Weren't a very nice kid, were ya, pal?"

Switch waved a hand and sighed. "Sorry. I guess not. In my mind, I had a row with my parents yesterday. Something about 'not pulling my weight' and 'talking back'."

"Teenage stress. I've been there." Macro kicked himself back from the wall and strutted over to Switch's bed. "It's not okay, mind you."

He tried to scramble onto the bed to no avail. Switch leant over and grabbed him by the scruff, yanking him onto the mattress. Macro shook out his fur and straightened his scarf. Then he leant back against the wall and tucked his paws behind his head.

"I know it's not okay," said Switch. "I just said things out of anger. Like then. I know you're not scum."

"Yeah, well. Take it from someone who knows from experience," said Macro. "I spent my irritable teenage years flyin' a pirate ship and shootin' laser pistols."

"Did it help?"

Macro waved his mechanical paw at himself. "Almost died more times than I can count. So I'd say 'no'."

Switch snorted. "You ever hurt anyone?"

Macro grimaced and toyed with the hem of his scarf. "Too many times. Kind of an eye opener."

"Well, I did, too. Said things I didn't mean." Switch sighed and shook his head. "I vividly remember my mother crying as my dad sent me to my room."

"Then what did you do?" Macro asked.

Switch shrugged. "I was planning to run away. I'd started writing a letter. After that, I don't remember. It's all blank."

Macro stared up at him, but the human didn't meet his eyes. "Well, if Socket removed all your memories about System, I'd say… you probably ended up here after that."

"What, so I did run away?" Switch snapped. "Ended up here with talking pokemon and locked in a ward like some kinda freak-show?!"

"You're not a freak-show!" Macro growled. "You're one of the nicest 'mon I ever met, and that's rich, 'cos you're not one!"

Switch groaned and let his head fall back against the wall. "I just wanna go home. I want to apologise!"

Macro balled his paws into fists and looked away. "Then you've left me with a difficult choice, 'cos I don't know which home to send you to anymore."

The door cracked open, drawing their eyes. DL peered back at them, smiling softly.

"Can I come in?" she asked.

Macro shrugged. "Sure."

She slipped through the door, clutching a fabric bag in one paw. Macro frowned at it.

"What's in the bag? It looks fancy," he asked.

"Oh, I erm…" She reached inside and pulled out a fabric bundle. "I wanted to replace your damaged scarf, but… I know you liked the old one, so…"

Macro hopped from the bed, landing in a crouch. He took the scarf from her and unwound it. Black glossy fabric with a blue pattern. But at either end, the old scarf Switch had brought him had been neatly sewn. The blue pattern complimented the blue pixel print perfectly, and it had been cut in a way that none of the damaged burnt bits remained.

"Do you like it?" DL asked.

"You kiddin' me?" he said. "I love it."

DL clapped her paws and beamed. "Try it on!"

Macro chuckled and placed the scarf back in her paws. Then he removed his old, black one. Compared to the new scarf, it looked old and faded. As he exchanged it for DL's gift, Switch let out a little gasp.

Macro craned his head around to see Switch with a hand clasped in his hair. His mouth hung open as he stared at the mawile, eyes trailing down his back.

"What's wrong?" Macro welled with concern and turned fully to face him.

"Those markings…" Switch's face rapidly dampened with sweat. "I think I've seen them somewhere…"

DL grabbed Macro by the arm and turned him so Switch could see them, tugging his heavy horn aside to reveal them more. Those two, brown stripes that had always reminded Macro of a pikachu.

Switch let his arm drop to his side and slowly slipped from the bed. "Yes. Yes, I have. I've seen them."

Macro frowned at him over his shoulder. "Not on a pikachu, though, right?"

"No, that wouldn't be weird at all," Switch scoffed. "No, I… I feel like they were somewhere strange. Black and white. No… blue. All three!"

He tugged at his hair as he strained to remember. Macro turned back to him, his muzzle creasing with worry.

"Easy there," he said. "You'll end up tuggin' it all out at this rate."

"Just let me think!" Switch snapped. "Sorry… Sorry, I don't mean to… Argh, where have I seen them before?"

Macro knew exactly where. Switch had already told him, weeks ago.

"A meowstic?" Macro offered.

Switch fixed his golden eyes on him, releasing his hair. "A meowstic…"

"Ringin' any bells?" Macro asked.

Switch shushed him, eyes drifting to the wall. "Yes… yes, I think… I faintly remember."

DL tapped Macro on his shoulder, drawing his attention. She stared transfixed at Switch, her chocolate eyes sparkling.

"I think it's working," she whispered. "I don't understand how."

Switch slumped to his bottom and trailed his hands down to his mouth. He looked at the two pokemon in turn.

"I remember him," he said. "And a mawile. But… I don't remember anything about them. Just… that they're friends of mine."

Macro's mouth curled into a smile, then he grinned as he punched himself in the chest. "They're also my ancestors."

"You've told me this," said Switch. "But I couldn't picture them as clearly as I am doing now. It's like… some kind of distant memory, or dream. Just like the memory of me writing that letter. I can see it, but I can't remember what it says."

"That's because Socket's removed them," said DL. "But I guess it was a rushed job if you're recalling things."

Switch stared at them for a moment, then let his hands fall into his lap. "Do you think I'll get these memories back?"

"If we can find them, yes," said Macro.

He grabbed the new scarf and tossed it over his shoulders. It wasn't much longer than the one Switch had given to him. He smoothed it out and beamed up at the human.

"Anythin' else come back to you there?" he asked.

Switch toyed with his watch and cleared his throat. "I'm suddenly not so scared of that talonflame form."

"Well that's good," said Macro. "'Cos we kinda need you."

"To fight?"

Macro met Switch's eye. The human grinned and rose to his feet, then he winked down at the mawile. Macro's jaw went slack, and he returned Switch's grin with one of his own.

"I think 'brave bird' is coming back to me," said Switch, "so I'm ready to try and master that Z-Move." He moved towards the door. "If it'll get me back home, I'll do it."

"Question!" Macro stopped Switch with a pointed claw. "Which home?"

Switch tugged the door open and shrugged. "I guess we'll find out if these memories keep coming back to me, won't we?"

…

Wildcard Gamma's cockpit was soon rammed to the gills as Annie lead her troop on board. Anchor closed up the rear and shooed the girl from his seat, much to her protests. He cast an eye over towards Switch, huddled in the corner in his talonflame form. Axle and his xurkitree friend worked silently beside him on the porygon-z. Its eyes periodically lit up, but other than that it didn't seem active.

"Nice to see you back aboard." The granbull grinned at Switch.

"Yeah, well…" Switch grimaced and ruffled his feathers. "I'm not sure how much use I'm going to be. I can't even get brave bird right, let alone use this Z-Crystal."

He flashed the Flyinium-Z around his left ankle.

Anchor exchanged a worried glance with Macro, which the mawile shrugged off with a wave.

"Priorities," said Macro. "We can't hold things up any longer. We need to get a wiggle on. I seriously doubt Distortion is gonna wait until we master things before twisting System into an unrecognisable…" He flicked a paw as he tried to find the right words.

"Coil?" Annie suggested.

Macro nodded and kicked his feet up on the dash. "I'll take it."

Annie grinned and nudged Waveform in the ribs. The decidueye let out a disgruntled hoot and smoothed out his feathers.

"So are we all aboard?" Anchor asked. "Because we ain't comin' back for no stragglers."

The cockpit shook as Trojan leapt aboard. He shuffled into the cockpit, tugging up his baggy fur to avoid tripping over it.

"We are now," said Web. "Where have you been?"

Trojan said nothing, dropping down beside Zip's bowl to work at his frame. He began fastening the Z-Crystal band into place around his front leg with a hexnut.

"That answers that question," said Web. "I think we're good to go."

"What about Mister Fox and the pussycat?" Annie asked.

"Eh?" Anchor cocked an eyebrow.

"She means Tracer and N0ize." Macro shuffled down in his seat and yawned. "They're holed up in two of the rooms - Switch's and my own. Apparently N0ize snores like a grumpig with allergies. They'll join us when we get there, let's go."

Wildcard Gamma shook as Anchor pulled her out of the docks. Macro spotted Celesteela as she backed away to give them space, before falling in step behind them with Omnom. (Annie had insisted on the nickname.)

DL nudged Macro to get his attention. "You gave up you room?"

Macro snorted and closed his eyes. "I didn't have much choice."

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 77

A/N - I was a bit concerned about this chapter as I believe it's one of the ones I fired out over November for NaNoWriMo. That meant a lot of words in one go, without deviating back too much to make serious edits. I found an embarrassing number of typos. But thankfully it didn't need too much tweaking. I hope you enjoy it nontheless!

Thanks again for all reviews, faves and follows!

Chapter Seventy Seven

The night was fast approaching as Wildcard Gamma encroached on Seed City. The distortion was clear from the ship's windows, twisting the ground and coating it in a purple haze. What was visible through the haze was almost unrecognisable as part of System. Huge lumps of rock drifted through it, and deep shadows forewarned of fissures splitting the earth.

"All right, we're here." Macro pushed himself back from the window, his voice wavering slightly. There had been no real sense of danger. Whatever had been going on to ruin the land had settled, but he still felt uneasy. "No backing out now."

His crew were already gathered around the door, checking over their Z-Crystals and supplies. Annie was still in her human form, which worried Macro greatly. She couldn't exactly utilise her Rockium-Z like that. He turned to Axle, still working at his Zero Day unit. It had been moving earlier, but the emolga had since switched it off.

"Any more joy?" Macro asked.

Axle tutted. "It'll be working again soon, don't you worry."

"So… are you joining us?"

Axle looked up at him, then over at the rest of the crew. "I doubt it. I don't have one of those fancy crystals, and someone's gotta watch your backs. Once I get this workin', I'll be there to send them Ultra Beasts back home. Don't you worry."

Macro cast a glance at Sparky, but the xurkitree didn't seem wounded by the emolga's words.

Macro shook it off and moved past them towards the hatch. A small movement from the kitchen diverted his attention and he locked eyes with Cookie. The brown slurpuff trembled so much his berry went lopsided.

"Don't worry, Cookie," Macro told him. "You don't need to come with us. No one's forcing you."

"But… but…" Cookie wound his paws together. "Solgaleo said… well… I've been practicing, and…"

Macro raised an eyebrow. "You've what?"

Cookie ducked back into the kitchen and peered at him around the door frame. "Practicing. You know… the aromatherapy stuff. Because… well…" He took a deep breath and stepped into the hallway, forcing his paws at his sides. "I don't want you to fall in battle again. None of you. You're all like family. You took me in and gave me a home. If I can be of any help, then I want to go with you." He grimaced and wound his paws into his thick coat. "Even if it terrifies the fur off me."

The corner of Macro's lips turned up in a half-smile. "In that case, come along. But it'll mean only Axle is watchin' the ship."

"Really?" Cookie squeaked. "D-does that matter?"

"Nah." Macro waved a paw. "I doubt he's gonna take off in it. Besides, after this, my space pirate days are over."

"B-but how do we get back? Cyan City? We need-"

Cookie trailed off and sighed, giving himself a mental shake. He joined the rest of the team by the hatch, his tiny paws balled into fists.

Macro scanned the hatch open and cold air buffeted them, driving them back. He braced himself against it and tugged his goggles down over his eyes.

"If anyone needs a mask, grab one," he said. "I've no idea what it's gonna be like down there. Just bare in mind there's only four of 'em, and one's tiny."

Macro tuned out the squabbling behind him between Tracer and Widget as the latter listed every reason under the sun why he didn't need a mask. Instead, Macro squinted down at the haze, trying to spot a suitable dropping point. Something brushed his paw and he glanced down at a filter mask clasped in DL's paws. He pushed it back towards her and returned to scanning the ground. There, right between a fissure and Seed City's dome of distortion. He grabbed a neon ladder rung and shouted at the rest of the crew to grab on.

Then he dropped.

Each flash from the ladder filled him with anxiety, but there was no turning back. That didn't mean he didn't desperately want to. He forced himself not to look back at his ship, not to even look up at his crew. As he descended, the Fairium-Z flickered out of the corner of his eye, giving off a soothing pink glow. Somehow it quelled his burning anxiety. He wasn't alone in this.

The purple haze washed over him and once he was through it his heart leapt. Drifting chunks of rock floated past him, peppered with twisted trees devoid of foliage. One of System's familiar mechanical trees hung from beneath one island, its trunk forming a coil pulled tight as though some magnetic force was straining to drag it back to earth. There was no sound, just an unearthly silence. Deep fissures

ran through the ground, zigging and zagging at sharp angles. Above them, lumps of brick drifted back and forth like some sort of ferry system, except they vanished and reappeared at odd intervals.

He braced himself for the inevitable danger, but it never came. Wasn't it supposed to be too dangerous for pokemon to venture near? Where was the counter attack? His Z-Crystal continued to let off that calming glow and realization washed over him. He gave a silent thanks to Solgaleo.

When Macro's feet touched the ground, it felt like he would keep falling, almost as if the ground weren't even there. He glanced down at the faux grass brushing his feet. Definitely stable. But each clump of grass looked like a bad render. Boxy, and lacking shadow.

Matrix buzzed down beside his head. "It looks like a low budget video game."

"Don't you dare say you like it," Macro grunted.

"No thanks," said Matrix. "I like my graphics high-res."

A long whistle came from Annie, slicing through the silence, and she released her ladder rung, landing in a crouch beside the two pokemon. She stood up straight and looked around as Waveform and Switch fluttered down beside her. Soon, everyone was gathered together, struggling to take in their strange surroundings.

"I can't help but fear this is the end," said Web. "What's happened to our world?"

Trojan placed a paw on her back but said nothing.

"It ain't the end," grunted N0ize. "And if it is, I'm goin' out with a bang. I don't know 'bout you guys."

"Sounds like a plan," said Widget.

Tracer let out a sigh and reached into his tail for his stick. "Bang it is."

Macro looked back at them all. Celesteela and Omnom stood behind the odd group, towering over them, yet in this strange world they didn't look imposing anymore. Not one of his crew was wearing a filter mask. There might not have been toxic air flowing around in this part of the distortion, but none of them had any idea what to expect inside Seed City. The unspoken message was pretty clear. If they were going to go down, they'd be going down together.

"If you want a bang, old chap," Rave told Tracer, "then I have those by the bucket."

Celesteela wailed a response that set the Ultra Beasts laughing amongst themselves. Whatever the private joke was, it lightened the mood.

He let out a dry chuckle and clenched his mechanical fist. "All right. Let's find that mansion. The other Ultra Beasts are probably already waiting for us."

Omnom gave a growling cheer and the troop rallied together towards the purple dome.

As they drew closer, a small army appeared in the haze. Anchor and the rest of his away team had done their best to describe their new allies, but it wasn't enough to prepare Macro, DL and Switch for the shock. A large mosquito-like creature stood with his arms crossed. The rest of the army was formed of nihilego of which Macro counted twelve, and seven xurkitree. They rallied around a humongous building which teetered on a set of four very spindly legs, and on top of it sprawled a rather elegant beetle. As they drew closer, the building's bricks flicked outward across its surface, revealing hundreds of blue eyes. They all fixed on a point above Macro's head and turned red. The creature atop it zipped from her perch in a flash, landing a safe distance away.

Widget let out an 'eep!' and Tracer brandished his stick.

"It's that thing again," said the eevee. "And I think it remembers us!"

"Whoa, hang on!" Macro lifted his paws and stood between the Ultra Beast and the detectives. "You fought this guy?"

"Yes," said Tracer. "It tried to kill us."

Macro looked up at the kartana, silently drifting from side to side as they assessed the situation. He was certainly no stranger to that scenario, and if both he and the kartana could let it slide…

He looked back at the detectives and stood aside, waving a paw at the brick creature. "Misunderstanding or not, we're on the same team now."

Tracer reluctantly replaced his stick and nudged Widget with his foot. The eevee staggered forward and cast a glace up at the delphox.

Widget sighed and turned back to the Ultra Beast. "I'm sorry we got lost in your insides. And… erm… attacked your… bricks?"

The wall of eyes flickered between red and blue, creating a complex pattern. Then they all snapped back inside the creature, leaving only one eye to drift along the wall between the pokemon and Ultra Beasts.

Rave and Poipole gave everyone a quick introduction, while only Rave knew what the brick creature was.

"This is a stakataka," he said. "It is actually composed of one hundred and fifty lifeforms acting as one. They're generally pretty placid, unless you anger them."

"Yeah," said Widget. "We found that one out the hard way."

The stakataka's eyes flashed across its surfaces in an erratic pattern.

Rave shrugged. "He says don't sweat it."

"Okay," said Pheramosa. "Now we've got the pleasantries out of the way, what are we going to do about this?" She waved at the purple haze.

Macro shook his head, scanning over the Ultra Beasts. "Is this all of you?"

"As many as we could find," said Pheramosa.

"But I thought… there were hundreds of nihilego… and xurkitree…"

"Yeah, well." Pheramosa flicked back her silky shell. "System fought back. Hard."

Macro felt his heart sink. He wasn't exactly innocent in that himself.

"So, do you have a plan?" Pheramosa asked. "Because I can't speak for everyone here, but I want to go home."

"I don't exactly have a plan," said Macro. "I don't generally do plans. I just run in and see what happens. But… I think I might have an idea."

Pheramosa narrowed her eyes at him.

"How good of an idea?" asked Anchor.

Macro looked over at each of his allies, then craned his head back to examine the purple haze. He scratched the base of his horn and frowned.

"I think we can safely say," he said, "that Distortion might be aware of our presence. I mean, if Socket's security system is anything to go by. He's got full control of that mansion, and is now taking hold of System."

Buzzwole tooted a reply and flexed at the haze.

"If he's aware," translated Rave, "he's not done anything about the Ultra Beasts standing around here for the past hour."

"Maybe that's because none of you have done anything yet," said Macro.

"That's a good point," said Rave. "He only attacked me when I fought back to defend my friends."

"All right then." Macro absently pawed at where his lasers would have been. "When we go in there, we need to prepare ourselves for a retaliation. Because I doubt he'll want us to reach that mansion."

"So that's your plan?" said Annie. "Because it's genius."

Macro frowned at her over his shoulder, not sure whether or not she was being sarcastic.

"No, it's not," he said. "If you'll all be patient, I'm still formulating it."

Poipole drifted from Web's tail and hovered above them, eyes fixed on Macro. "I already detect a flaw in your plan, and you haven't even made it yet."

"Really?" Macro folded his arms and frowned back at him. "Go on."

"You're voicing it." Poipole paused for a moment, turning his bulbous head back and forth from the pokemon and the haze. "When I speak to you, I speak to all of you. I don't need Distortion to hear what I'm saying."

"Okay, so I ain't telepathic like you." Macro waved a paw at him. "Why don't you come up with a plan?"

"All right." Poipole drifted closer to him so they were almost nose to nose. "I have one. Listen."

…

Macro, with his team, cautiously ventured into the haze. He went first, with Matrix hovering beside his head. Switch followed behind him, keeping pace beside Buzzwole and Rave. Anchor closed up the rear, ushering Cookie on ahead of him. But Wildcard Gamma wasn't complete. Macro felt very lost without DL. Unfortunately, she'd had to accompany and lead one of the other teams. Between them all, only DL and Matrix had any idea of the mansion's lay-out, provided it hadn't been warped. So she'd taken charge of Time Archeops. The remaining small Ultra Beasts were led by Pheramosa, who insisted on bringing along Stakataka. They also took Tracer's team with them, who could provide the Ultra Beasts with some knowledge of their world. That just left Celesteela and Omnom to circumnavigate Seed City, providing muscle where needed.

Each small team had its own function. Macro's team was to enter the mansion from the ground. But first, they had to find it.

He paused and took in his surroundings. Seed City had been transformed into some alien world. The floor rose up in chunks, leaving deadly pot holes and fissures where it had once lay. Buildings dotted the small islands, warped and twisted beyond recognition. Something felt very off about the gravity. Wherever Macro put his feet, he felt like he wasn't quite walking on the ground.

He made his way forward, ducking beneath an island to check the ground beneath. It had previously been a road, but a long, wide crack ran across it, slicing through ruins on either side. No. If he stood on the fissure, he'd surely fall. They'd need to find another way across, or around it.

"Hey, Switch." He turned to the talonflame. "Any chance you can fly us all over?"

Switch stretched out his wings and hopped, flapping to gain momentum. But no matter how hard he beat his wings, he couldn't get into the air. His beak fell open and he stuttered.

"I… I can't," he said.

"You remember how, though?" Macro asked.

"I… I don't think I've ever tried," said Switch.

Macro turned to Buzzwole, but before he could open his mouth, the large bug fluttered his wings, creating a high-pitched whine. A look of surprise crossed his beady eyes and he performed a couple of small hops. Then shrugged.

"Something seems amiss," said Rave. "As though Buzzwole is suddenly too heavy to fly. I am going to hazard a guess that the same applies to your feathered companion."

"Then how can Matrix fly?" asked Cookie.

Matrix looked down at himself, a dull drone coming from his wings. He glanced at each of them in turn and shook his head.

"Don't look at me," he said. "I can't carry you across."

Rave turned his head to look back at Macro. "Ominous. I sense trickery."

Macro grimaced and turned back to the drifting blocks. "Well ain't that just dandy. It's like he knows we're comin'. Maybe Poipole was right?" He sighed and rubbed his scar. "How are we gonna get across?"

"Do any of us know telekinesis?" suggested Matrix. "Or psychic?"

Macro looked up at the Ultra Beasts. They both shook their heads.

"Fantastic," said Macro. "So we're gonna have to either walk until we find a way around it… or…" His eyes went to the platforms drifting idly past. "Anchor, gimme a boost?"

The granbull grabbed Macro by the waist in both paws and hoisted him up onto the platform. It slowly carried him away as he rose to his feet to check the other side. One leap and he'd be across. He

crouched down and launched himself forward, performing a shoulder roll across the tarmac. He scrambled into a crouch and looked back at his companions.

They gathered around the next platform, but before Anchor could grab onto it, it vanished. A look of surprise crossed the granbull's face and he looked to his left. One platform after another drifted towards them, only to vanish before they could climb aboard.

"I hate to say this, Cap'n," said Anchor. "But I'm afraid we're gonna have to find another way."

Macro's heart sank. So he was alone? He grimaced and pushed himself to his feet.

"Well, we don't have much choice, do we?" he growled. "Dang it, Poipole was right. He's watchin' us."

"Don't worry," said Anchor. "We'll meet you somewhere. Stick to the-"

Rave slammed his paw over Anchor's mouth. "Allow me to tell him, old chap. Perchance Distortion hears you and throws another spanner in the works." He cleared his throat and released the granbull. "Stick to the right. We'll try and get to you."

Macro nodded his understanding and watched as his team moved away. Buzzwole gave him a friendly flex before tailing them around a corkscrewed skyscraper.

Suddenly the world felt very empty.

Macro turned and stuck to the right of the old road. The very buildings appeared detached from it, an ultra violet glow emanating from where they met the ground. He glanced through one of the windows. All the furniture was on the ceiling while a wigglituff sat frozen in a chair, oblivious to what was going on. A teacup was clasped in one paw while the other was frozen reaching for the TV

remote. Macro resisted the urge to peer inside any other windows. It was too creepy. Too real.

He hugged his arms about himself as he searched for any promising route to reach his friends. But every right turn was blocked off by a fissure, or a wall that shouldn't have been there. Much too high to climb. Too thick to break through.

He just had to keep searching.

…

"Good grief, that's creepy." Annie paused to peer through yet another window. "Like… that kid spilled juice. And the juice is still floatin' in the air."

"Come along, dear." Web grabbed her shoulder and dragged her away from the glass.

DL shook her head and returned to looking around, pawing at her ear. Everywhere they turned, it was a dead end. But there was no turning back. A huge fissure had appeared in the road, out of nowhere, barring them from ever leaving. That meant they had to keep moving forward. The long road went on with no obstruction, leading them around the edge of Seed City.

Zip tapped at the edge of the fissure with one of his mechanical legs. "Too wide. And there's no bridge like last time."

"I really don't know how we're meant to get through this," said DL. "If we can't reach the mansion-"

Poipole drifted back down from the rooftops. "There's a path this way."

He zipped on ahead of them, leading them a little way along before turning a sharp left. The narrow alley was just wide enough to let them through. They gathered on a wide road that looked like it may

have been one of the main roads through the city. But none of the buildings could tell them that. Each one was devoid of colour. An odd grey, twisted and broken into chunks. DL glanced back the way they had come, and squeaked.

A dead end. A huge wall had appeared out of nowhere.

"It's like a jackin' labyrinth," Trojan scoffed. "What's goin' on?"

Poipole lifted a claw before his motionless lips and shushed him. Then he drifted back into the air to scout another way.

"I hope the others are okay," said Web. "This place is really hard to navigate."

Waveform nodded, casting his eyes over the buildings. "If I could only fly, this would be no problem to get through."

"So you keep sayin'," said Trojan. He wafted Web away as she shushed him close to his ear. "Why does everyone keep shushin' me?"

Annie crept away from them, eyes drawn to a large, drifting chunk of rock. Her eyes widened and she waved behind her.

"You guys have gotta see this," she said.

Large buildings clung to the rock's vertical surface. She trotted towards it, her friends tailing after her. Poipole zipped down from above, hovering over her head silently. The road was unobstructed, allowing full view of the vertical landscape. Annie placed one foot on it, then another. A squeal of delight left her throat as she strolled long the vertical road, then she looked back down at her friends.

"I wonder if we're meant to go this way?" she said.

Poipole drifted ahead of her, leveling out as he reached the rock. "It appears to have its own gravity field. It is impossible for me to just drift over it like a wall."

Web gazed up at it, mouth agape. "I wonder where it leads?"

"Only one way to find out." Waveform placed his talons on it and followed Annie along the road.

The human casually strolled through the buildings, each one more of a ruin than the last. Eerie ultraviolet light lit up her white shirt with a purple glow, almost blinding. She tried to hide her arms behind her back to avoid being dazzled. The vertical path reached an abrupt end, forming a sharp corner. But it was as easy to traverse as the climb had been. She found herself flipped upright, standing a mile above the rooftops. She stood surrounded by rubble, which drifted idly through the air. She shoved a lump of it aside, and it pinged to her right as if pulled away by some magnetic force. Then she shifted another. Then another.

Once it was cleared, she had a perfect view of Seed City. And there in the centre sat the mansion.

Zip stopped beside her and let out a long 'whoa!'

Purple fire exploded around the mansion like tendrils, curving into the earth and leaping back out to impale anything and everything around it. The flames spread the purple haze, and after a few hundred feet, the flames vanished into the earth entirely.

"Like the roots of a tree," said Waveform.

"Eh?" Annie looked around at him. "What's that?"

"It's holding on to Seed City," he said. "Anchored in place."

"I'd say it's more like a parasite," said Annie.

Waveform nodded. "A fitting description, given what it's done to System."

"Do you think we'll ever get our home back?" Zip asked.

Waveform didn't reply, staring out at the surreal landscape.

Web and Trojan joined them with DL.

"Well I'll be," Web gasped. "There it is."

"Oh to be able to fly," said Waveform. "We'd be there in a heartbeat."

"It's monstrous," said DL.

Everyone turned to look at her, but she shook her head and tore her eyes from the mansion.

"I have no words," she said.

She looked up at the sky. From this height, they could see Celesteela and Omnom struggling to reach the centre. Too big to pass the rubble, which didn't move as easily as Annie's rocks had. Omnom munched his way through, allowing Celesteela to pass, but they'd reappear just as quickly, slowing his progress greatly.

As for the others… They were lost somewhere in the labyrinth below.

"I hope they're all okay down there," said DL.

Waveform tapped Annie's shoulder and herded DL forward.

"Let's keep going," he said. "If we find anyone, we'll help them."

…

With each step Macro clutched tighter at his scarf. The city felt more and more like a surreal dungeon. Empty and devoid of life. Deep down he knew that wasn't true, but the ruined buildings and the lack of wind made him feel oddly alone. He couldn't even see Celesteela or Omnom drifting overhead. Couldn't even hear Celesteela's eerie screams. He was beginning to long for them.

He paused at another dead end, gazing up at the wall. It vanished beyond the haze. Smooth. Impossible to climb. The overflowing, blue trash can with its scattered nanab peels was too familiar. He'd come from this way only minutes before. Somehow he'd found his way back. Where had the wall come from?

He turned his back on it and made a right, following the wide road around the edge of the city. Just one route and he'd find his way back into the thick of the buildings. So close. He'd been so close only to run into a pile of rubble. Now he was back at the edge of it, far away from his allies.

Maybe it was a trap?

He clasped at his scarf, turning his head to look back at the alley. But it was blocked off by a building. The former skyscraper lay on its side, its windows cracked. Yet not a brick was out of place. Compared to everything else, it appeared immaculate. On its side, a street lamp protruded from it, its light flickering erratically. Yet it cast no shadow.

He turned away from it, trying to push it to the back of his mind and find his way. But every alley was blocked. He gazed up at the drifting rocks overhead, much too high for him to reach. When he looked back down, there was the skyscraper. On its side, with its flickering street lamp. No longer behind him, where he'd left it. And on his right, the alley with its blue trashcan and nanab peels.

A long groan left his throat and he sank to his bottom, burying his face in his scarf.

"Where am I?" His voice sounded faint in the silence. Flat. Not even an echo.

Tears soaked through his scarf and he doubled over, trying to stifle his violent sobs.

"Guys! Find me, please!"

…

Anchor shoved a huge rock to one side. Light as a feather. It crashed into the wall of a house, not leaving so much as a scuff. His eyes widened as they met those of Pheramosa. She shifted her weight to one foot and placed a paw on her hip.

"About time help showed up," she said.

Anchor grunted and led his group through. Matrix buzzed on ahead of him to survey the area.

Two huge fissures carved through the floor in a cross. On one section stood Stakataka, covered by nihilego. They clung onto him for dear life, tinkling in fear. Next to them, across the gorge, six of the xurkitree. The seventh was stranded alone across from it, electricity sparking across its limbs as it garbled away in its unusual language.

"How did this happen?" Anchor asked.

Pheramosa tutted. "As if questions like that are valid in this world? Look at this place! It came from nowhere!"

Anchor nodded stiffly and rubbed his mohawk. "Well… I'm afraid I can't help you. None of us can."

Pheramosa looked up at Matrix and cocked an eyebrow. He shook his head and shrugged.

"All right." She turned to Anchor's team and her eyes fell on Buzzwole and Switch. "I'm going to guess if I can't jump then you can't fly?"

Buzzwole shook his head and tooted his kazoo, while Switch stuttered a 'no'.

"We're as stuck as you are." Rave's lights turned a pale blue. "No way across. We'll have to split up and find a way around until we find each other."

"We've already lost Macro," said Anchor. "He's out there somewhere alone."

Pheramosa snorted and turned to the lone xurkitree. "Hey, Kzappro!"

It jolted and looked up at her, stopping mid ramble.

"Think you can find a way through and find their lost ally?" she asked.

"Erm, excuse me," said Matrix. "But we're not really meant to broadcast-"

Pheramosa narrowed her eyes, silencing the ribombee. "I don't care. It's clearly making no difference."

"I'm actually starting to wonder that myself," said Rave. "If we keep getting split up, soon there'll be none to telepathically communicate. Besides… I think I might have an idea."

"I hope it's a good'un," said Anchor. "'Cos I'm out."

"Oh, I think you'll find it borders on genius." Rave chuckled and rubbed his paws together. "I suggest… we broadcast our moves as much as possible. There are many of us, and only one Distortion. Let's add some confusion to the fray."

Anchor's jaw dropped and he wagged a claw at the blacephalon. "I think I like it."

"Finally," said Pheramosa. "Someone with a braincell."

Kzappro garbled and sparked, then slinked away. Matrix followed after him for a moment, then paused on the other side of the gorge.

"There's actually a path over here," he said. "I wonder if we can find a way across?"

Switch shuffled to the edge then fluttered his wings. Nothing. He sighed and shook his head.

"But how?" he asked. "It's too wide to jump, even if I could glide."

"Here's a bright spark." Pheramosa turned back to Buzzwole. "Have you tried tossing anyone across these gaps?"

Buzzwole shook his head.

"Then try." She strutted over to him. "Start with me."

"While it might help us," said Anchor, "it doesn't help them, does it?"

He waved towards the nihilego and xurkitree.

Pheramosa clicked her tongue then sighed. "No. I guess not. But if it gets us across, we can make progress while they try to find another way. Because we're stuck here. There's no way back."

Anchor looked over his shoulder. Sure enough, those rocks had vanished to be replaced by a stack of small houses.

"How long have they been there?" he asked.

Pheramosa shrugged. "You came through one of the doors. They appeared once we'd reached this gorge."

Anchor stuttered and shook his head. "This place is a whole other level of nonsense."

He looked around again, his heart sinking like a lead brick.

"Hang on a sec," he said. "Where's the detectives?! I thought they were meant to be with you!"

All eyes went back to the house, slicing across the road and into the ruins either side of it.

"My guess is they're stuck in there," said Pheramosa. "Or behind it. And behold!" She waved a paw towards the building. "The door is gone."

"Then let's hope they're behind it," said Matrix.

The ribombee began to zip towards the house, but Anchor reached up a paw and grabbed him by the leg.

"Hold you're mudsdales, Matrix," he said. "If you go over that buildin', chances are you'll get separated n'all."

"I have an idea." Rave removed his head and juggled it in one paw. "I can blast a door open. If they're inside, then-"

"No." Anchor released Matrix and placed a paw on the Ultra Beast's shoulder. "We can't go attacking things. Distortion might fight back more than it's doin' already, and someone could get hurt. We need to keep our numbers steady for when we reach the mansion."

"He has a point." Switch ruffled his feathers. "I'm sure Tracer and Widget can take care of themselves."

"Seconded." Pheramosa turned back to the gorge. "All right, big guy. Toss me across."

Buzzwole didn't hesitate. He grabbed Pheramosa in both his huge paws and leant back with her over his shoulder. Then he skipped forward and punted her as far as she would go. The lithe bug soared over the gorge, righting herself in mid air so her feet pointed forward. Then she landed daintily on the other side. She dusted herself down then turned back to her allies.

"There." She placed a paw on one hip. "Success. Now, how about-"

Her words trailed off as debris drifted through the air. Two rows of huge, flat platforms crossed before the group in opposite directions,

low enough to climb onto. It offered a way to cross to both sides, but none of the Ultra Beasts dared move.

Matrix hovered over them and 'hmm'd', winding his antenna in thought.

"I've seen things like this in games," he said. "Here, Anchor. Climb onto one, then wait for another to pass by. Hop onto that then you can leap to the other side."

"I ain't goin' first," said Anchor. "I'm in charge here. I say Switch goes first."

"Me?" Switch squeaked. He sighed and smoothed his feathers. "Okay. My life is in your paws, bee."

He hopped onto the first platform and flailed his wings to steady himself.

"Try to be quick now," said Matrix. "You want to join Pheramosa, not be stranded with Stakataka."

Switch fluttered to the next rock then kicked himself off to land in a crumpled heap beside Pheramosa. She looked down at him and tutted.

"Hey, don't sass," he groaned as he straightened himself up. "I'm still getting used to this body."

Buzzwole stepped forward next, but as he did the drifting blocks changed. Each row jerked from side to side, independent of each other. Matrix made a thoughtful noise then cleared his throat.

"This one is more tricky," he said. "Put one paw wrong and you'll miss, only to fall into a bottomless pit of doom."

"I feel like you're enjoyin' this," muttered Anchor.

Matrix shrugged and said nothing.

"All right, there's only one way for it," said Anchor. "Buzzwole and Rave… you two go together."

Buzzwole tooted and grabbed Anchor in his huge arms.

"He says no one gets left behind," said Rave. "And I agree with him. Tally ho, old chap!" He smacked Buzzwole on the back.

The huge insect tooted a triumphant ditty and leapt onto the rock beside Blacephalon.

"Easy now," said Matrix. "Think before you leap."

Buzzwole braced himself, watching the drifting rocks carefully. His footing remained steady as the floating rocks lurched from side to side. Then he leapt.

Anchor screwed his eyes shut and his heart flipped. If Buzzwole missed…

The Ultra Beast landed heavily on the next rock. Then he leapt again, bridging the gap to the other side. He landed beside Rave and the two Ultra Beasts high-fived. Buzzwole placed Anchor down carefully and caught his eye. Then flexed.

"Thanks." Anchor grinned and punched him in the arm.

Buzzwole returned the gesture, knocking the granbull off his feet.

Switch fluttered to his side. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Anchor sat back up, catching an apologetic glance off Buzzwole. "No worries. Let's just… get lookin' for Macro, eh?"

"What about them?" Rave waved across to Stakataka and its allies.

The xurkitree had moved from the gorge towards the huge beast. There was no way Stakataka could use those platforms, and the gorge was too wide for it to act as a bridge. But something else

caught Anchor's eye. Beyond the Ultra Beasts was an alley, lying wide open.

"The terrain's changed again," he said. "They can get out of there now."

"Oh thank goodness," said Rave. He cupped his paw where his mouth should be. "Move on out, boys! Keep aiming for the centre!"

Stakataka creaked and groaned as it rose to its feet. It moved out, carrying its charge of nihilego, while the xurkitree flocked around it.

…

Tracer tapped the stone wall and tutted.

"Solid as ever," he said. "Nice idea, Widget, thinking there would be an invisible door. But I think you might be wrong."

"You think?" N0ize grunted.

Defrag stood beside him, nursing her paw. "I loathe this dimension already."

"So you keep sayin'," said N0ize.

She cast the incineroar a sideways leer. "Hey, you're the one who suggested we punch our way out."

N0ize raised his paws in a shrug. "Hey, you're the one who went and did it."

"Yeah, while you watched and laughed."

"Enough of this," said Tracer.

Defrag let her paw drop to her side and leered at him.

"We're all in this together," said the delphox. "Cast your differences aside and work as a team, or we're never going to get out of here."

"You're the one who recruited a space pirate," Defrag scoffed.

"Yes, and you used to be one." Tracer wagged a claw at her. "Now put your space pirate knowledge together and lets find a way out of here. Please. Before the walls close in."

"They ain't closin' in," said Widget. "Stop worryin'."

"Don't give it ideas!" Tracer hissed.

"You went there first," said Widget. "Not me. Now… are we bashing our way out of here, or not?"

"Not." Defrag kicked herself from the wall. "I say we continue finding our way through this maze of corridors until we find an exit. This world keeps changing so much I won't be surprised if a door suddenly opens beneath us."

Tracer paled at that.

"Now lets get a move on," said Defrag. "I am in desperate need of a change of scenery."

Tracer gave the wall one last glance and followed after his friends. Widget kept pace at his side, humming to himself. His voice echoed off the walls, only adding to the eeriness and emptiness.

Not even a window in sight. Where was the light even coming from?

He tried not to think too much about it, keeping his eyes on the two pokemon ahead of him. N0ize walked silently beside Defrag, his paws folded behind his head.

A soft sound sliced through the air, dragging Tracer's fur on end. He froze and reached for his stick.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered.

Defrag and N0ize stopped to look back at him.

"Hear what?" N0ize asked.

Tracer swallowed and strained his ears. Whatever it was, it had stopped.

"Maybe it was nothing," he muttered. "My mind playing tricks on me."

"I think you're getting cabin fever," said Widget. "Think about… I dunno… mountains or somethin'."

The eevee's words did little to alleviate Tracer's anxiety. He kept hold of his stick, remaining close to his friends as they wound through the maze-like corridor.

Defrag tutted and turned back, pushing past Tracer.

"Dead end," she said.

Tracer gave the wall ahead of them a mournful look and followed Defrag back the way they'd came.

Swish swish!

Tracer froze. That noise again. No, this time he was convinced it wasn't in his head. He clasped his stick tightly, keeping his ears pricked. Defrag and N0ize still seemed oblivious to it, but Widget's ears twitched and swivelled back and forth.

The eevee glanced up at Tracer and nodded. Yes. He'd heard it.

Swish swish!

N0ize froze in his tracks and lowered his paws. Defrag clenched hers at her sides.

"Okay, you weren't wrong," she whispered.

The slicing noise grew in intensity. Claws scraped over rock, screeching through the air. Tracer lifted his stick, preparing a flamethrower.

Three small shapes rounded the corner like a trio of shimmering darts. Their bodies lit up red as they dodged the flames, careening nimbly through the air and running their sharp bodies over the stone. Sparks flew, peppering Tracer's fur. He quickly lowered his stick, spinning on the spot to follow the kartana.

They drifted behind him, swaying from side to side as they analysed the threat.

"I'm so sorry," Tracer muttered.

The lead kartana softly swiped its blades together. That familiar swishing sound emanated through the air.

"I think they were looking for us," said Defrag.

"Aye," said N0ize. "Must have heard us talkin'."

Tracer replaced his stick and gave his team an embarrassed glance. Of course. The kartana. The little trio had gone ahead to scout a path shortly after his team had entered the distortion.

Widget took a step towards them. "I take it you got lost too, eh?"

The kartana clattered their blades together.

"I take it that's a 'yes'," said N0ize.

"I'm taking it as an 'obviously'." Defrag turned back to the kartana. "You came from that way." She nodded behind her. "Does it lead to a dead end?"

The lead kartana performed a twirl in the air and darted over their heads. Its two friends stuck close behind it, vanishing around a tight corner.

"Follow them!" Tracer trotted after them, slipping past Defrag and N0ize.

The soft paw steps of his allies reassured him they were close behind as he followed the kartana's tiny forms. Their twists and turns were unpredictable as they took each bend as though they'd travelled the maze countless times.

As Tracer took a sharp right turn, the kartana appeared right in front of him. He screeched to a halt, sliding onto his bottom. He stood back up and dusted himself down, then looked up at them. They drifted side to side right before a huge, gaping door.

"That leads outside, right?" N0ize rubbed the back of his head. "'Cos… it could easily be an illusion. I've met my fair share of zoroark to know that."

The lead kartana clanged its arms together twice, then zipped through the open door.

Tracer nodded to his friends and followed the other two kartana out of the building.

"How did they know it was here?" Defrag asked.

Widget looked back at her. "Maybe they found it, but heard us bickering and came to find us?"

"That's… pretty touching, actually," said Defrag.

The kartana zipped back to Tracer then turned and dived behind a small pile of rubble situated at the mouth of an alley. A skyscraper cut across the road beyond it, a street lamp sticking out of its side. Its light flickered erratically but cast no shadow. The sight set

Tracer's fur on end. He tore his eyes from it and followed the kartana. One of them drifted over the rubble, clattering its limbs.

Tracer realised what it was trying to tell him. Curled in a tight ball behind the rubble lay Macro, his entire body trembling.

"Good grief! Guys, it's Hunter!" He dropped beside the space pirate and placed a paw on his shoulder. "Hey! Are you okay?"

Macro cracked an eye open as the detectives and N0ize peered down at him. He let out a squeak of surprise and pushed himself up into a crouch.

"Y… you're real, right?" he asked.

"Yep, pretty much," said N0ize.

"What are you doing lying out here?" Defrag asked.

"I… kept goin' in circles." Macro pushed himself to his feet and smoothed out his scarf. "I couldn't stand lookin' at that street lamp any more. No matter where I went, I found my way back to it. I guess I ended up havin' some kinda breakdown."

The lead kartana zipped past his head and leapt at the street lamp. It jerked to the side, sticking out at an odd angle. The entire ground rumbled and the pokemon turned their heads to the alley. The huge wall rumbled and rattled as it retreated into the ground, revealing an exit into a huge, wide road.

"Well I'll be," said Macro. "I wouldn't have guessed that in a million years."

The kartana zoomed over their heads ahead of them. Tracer rallied the group on after the kartana and closed up the rear, drawing his stick. When they reached the street, electricity sparked from their right and they froze.

A xurkitree flopped towards them, followed by Pheramosa and the rest of Wildcard Gamma.

"Cap'n!" Anchor rushed forward and pulled Macro into a crushing hug.

The mawile wriggled from his grasp and caught his breath. "Boy, am I glad to see you."

Pheramosa stepped forward and placed a paw on Macro's shoulder. "You might be even more glad to see this."

She spun him around and the mawile's jaw dropped.

Tracer followed his gaze, and gasped.

Looming at the end of the wide road was Socket's mansion. Purple fire streaked from it, plunging into the road like the roots of a tree. The buildings around it were speared by the fire and cast in its eerie, ultraviolet glow.

"Hey!" A loud whoop followed the cry.

Tracer turned his head to follow it and raised an eyebrow. Annie stood steady on a vertical plain, waving jubilantly as she led her group down it. Just below them stood Stakataka and its group, eagerly awaiting Time Archeops.

"All right," said Macro. "There's no time to back out now. You know your places."

Tracer ignored him and readied his stick. He'd noticed something Macro hadn't. A huge, flaming, purple tendril dragged itself free of the building beside them. The pokemon scattered as rubble rained down onto the road. Then the tendril reached up and swiped the vertical plain. Time Archeops erupted into screams as they vanished into the fray.

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Please R&R! =D

Chapter 78

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Seventy Eight

Macro rolled to the side as a huge boulder crashed down where he'd been standing, cutting him off from Anchor. The mawile clambered to his feet and spun, shattering the boulder with his horn. Shards of rock went flying, pelting Anchor's arms as he shielded his face. He lowered his paws and muttered a thanks as he leapt to Macro's side.

"I've never fought anythin' like this," said Macro. "But I'm gonna guess we take out the tendrils."

"If we wanna get close to the mansion, then yeah!" Anchor whipped Macro aside, narrowly dodging one of Distortion's tentacles. It left a nasty burn mark on the concrete. He grabbed Macro in his arms and rolled them both out of the way of another swipe, then launched a sucker punch at it as it retreated.

They both stood up and looked back at their allies. Tracer fired off flamethrowers to drive back the tentacles. Widget buffeted him out of the way of falling debris, then launched himself into a full-body tackle. The eevee flew through the tentacle, severing its end. Widget screamed as fire seared his fur, but the end of the fiery limb lay writhing on the floor. The rest of it retreated into the ground as a deep growl filled the air.

'Don't you get in my way!'

Two more tentacles erupted from the floor, scooping up Tracer and his allies. Defrag screamed as she fought against it, smacking the flames with ice punches.

Macro cupped his paws around his mouth. "Use your Z-Moves!"

Tracer struggled to get his paw free. His stick fell to the floor and he howled with frustration.

A flutter of feathers leapt into the fray, glowing with a white light. But it fizzled out before Switch could get his Supersonic Skystrike to work. He landed in a crumpled heap beneath the flames. Macro shook himself and rushed to the talonflame's aide, dragging him out of the chaos. A small tendril swooped across the ground, sweeping Macro off his feet and separating him from Switch.

'You are pests!' Distortion roared. 'Nothing but fleas on the body of my world!'

Hundreds of tendrils exploded from the ground. One of them speared Macro in the back, tossing him into the air. He roared with pain, and red flashed across his vision. When it cleared, all he saw below him was a spiralling, crimson inferno. He flailed his paws, desperate to avoid falling into it. But it subsided, revealing Anchor standing in a circle of black. All the tendrils around him were gone. Distortion roared, shaking the very ground. Macro came crashing back down onto Anchor, winding the granbull. Macro rolled off his friend and thanked him, before looking around to gather his bearings.

"He didn't like that," Anchor muttered as he pulled Macro to his feet.

Switch flapped his way out of the purple flames, gasping with each step. "This is crazy! We don't stand a chance!"

"I advise optimism," Anchor grunted. "Come on, I've got an idea."

Macro stared mournfully at the chaos. His friends writhing in Distortion's grasp, or desperately trying to avoid being speared while fighting back. "Well, I hope it's better than mine."

"We grab as many allies as we can, and fight our way inside, while everyone else distracts the building." He grunted and leapt back from a tumbling rock. "There's words I never thought I'd say."

A few toots drew their eyes to Buzzwole. The huge insect barrelled through several tendrils, destroying them with his bug buzz. Then he landed beside Anchor and flexed.

"Well done." Anchor grabbed his arm. "You're with us. Kartana! This way!"

Macro grabbed Switch's wing and tugged him after him. "Sorry, Switch, but you're not much use in this battlefield."

"Hey, I'm trying!" Switch protested.

Macro ignored him, craning his head back to spot the rest of his crew. "Matrix!"

There was no time to wait around. He dived ahead of him as a flaming tentacle crashed down between him and Switch. The talonflame squawked, flapping his wings and scattering feathers.

"Move it!" Macro barked, reaching back to throw Switch ahead of him. "Follow Anchor!"

Switch didn't protest. He scrambled after the granbull, hopping and flapping as he strained to fly in Distortions crazy gravity.

Macro sprinted after him, desperate to reach the mansion. Anchor had already made it, thumping any tendrils that got in his way. The ground rumbled and another flurry of tentacles erupted through the ground. Macro squealed and fell backwards as he scrambled way from them. Sparkles and explosions tore through them before they provided any real threat, and they retreated back with another angry roar.

Rave landed before him and bowed his now tiny head. "I think a plan is needed, Captain."

"Great timing," said Macro. "Anchor has one, but we can't get it to everyone. We're kinda winging it. Tell Time Archeops and the Ultra

Beasts, and anyone else you can find, to provide a distraction. But I need Matrix and DL, stat!"

"Roger!" Rave leapt into the air, diving over Distortion's flaming weapons. Flamethrowers and shadow balls severed them, beating them back from the space pirate as Rave rushed to deliver his message.

It didn't take long. Macro heard Rave's telepathic voice in his head in a matter of seconds. But whether or not Distortion could hear it was another matter entirely.

Macro desperately hoped not.

Anchor, Buzzwole and Switch waited just inside the mansion gates. Macro scurried in, casting a glance back over his shoulder. Matrix's tiny form weaved between tendrils as they chased after him, desperate to stop him reaching the mansion. Macro began to miss his weapons. A few laser fires and he could pick them off to aide the ribombee. Switch reared up beside him and fired off a series of embers. They struck the tendrils, causing them to flinch back and allow Matrix through unscathed.

"How's that for useless?" Switch muttered.

"I didn't mean…" Macro dragged his claws down his face and groaned. "There's no time for this!"

The ribombee buzzed beside Macro's head. "Rave said you want me?"

"Yeah." Macro ushered Matrix across the garden. "I need you to stick by Switch. Once we're inside, you need to find the computer and fix him up."

"So I'm on memory duty?" Matrix shrugged. "Okay, I can dig it."

"Now how do we find a way in?" Macro asked. "I'm guessing not the main door."

"No. That's fairly obvious," said Matrix. "A back entrance is much more sneaky. The front is likely heavily guarded."

"Gaming knowledge?" Switch asked.

Matrix paused and tugged at his antenna. "Come to think of it, all entrances are likely heavily guarded. But as memory serves, the computer used to remove Switch's memories was in the basement, and I'd personally like some ease here."

Flaming explosions lit up the sky. N0ize leapt across the purple flames, striking each one with a fire punch. The result was an explosion of purple and red, and it lit up the immaculate garden. He dropped to the ground beside them in a crouch and grinned.

"You ain't havin' all the fun. Count me in."

Macro placed a paw on his hip and frowned. "We could use some extra muscle. Have you used your Z-Move yet?"

"Not yet," said N0ize. "Why, was I meant to?"

"Not unless you needed to," said Macro. "If you haven't yet, save it for battling Distortion."

N0ize clasped his fist, flashing his Darkinium-Z. "You got it. Bring it on."

"I love the enthusiasm. But first, we've gotta get in." Macro nodded at the building.

"Aye. You didn't happen to see a basement door from up there, did you?" Anchor asked.

"As a matter of fact…" N0ize gave them a toothy grin.

He turned with a flourish and led them around the edge of the building. Flailing tentacles reached up above their heads, swiping at the nihilego. At some point the gravity had shifted, allowing the Ultra Beasts to fly. Maybe the distraction was working?

"Here you go." N0ize stopped with his paws on his hips and nodded at the ground. "Basement door. Looks like this guy found it first. Keyed me in."

The door lay at an angle at the building's base. Beside it, a xurkitree lay sparking. One of its limbs was bent at an odd angle beneath it.

"What happened to you?" Macro stooped to help the xurkitree up.

It babbled at them in its strange voice and struggled to its feet.

"Best keep it with us," said Anchor. "We can't send it back out there into battle in this state."

The xurkitree babbled again, turning its spiky head left and right.

Anchor stooped to grab the door and pulled. Once. Twice. He grunted and released it.

"Won't budge," he said.

"We could burn it?" N0ize offered.

"No, I don't want to risk it fighting back," said Anchor. "We're gonna need-"

Buzzwole leant towards it and grabbed the door. His muscles bulged as he wrenched on the handle. The plastic splintered around the catch and it swung open, creaking loudly on its strained hinge. Beyond it was a flight of stairs leading down into the basement, lit up by a dim, purple light.

"Hey, would you look at that!" Anchor grinned, stepping forward onto the stairs. "We're in!"

"Way to go!" N0ize cheered, flexing his arms.

Buzzwole released the door and flexed triumphantly. It swung back on its hinges, slamming Anchor in the back. A loud yelp came from beyond it, followed by a repetitive thud as the granbull tumbled down the stairs.

Macro stared at the door aghast.

N0ize placed his paws over his mouth, exchanging glances with Buzzwole. "Oops?"

Buzzwole copied him, placing his huge paws over his proboscis.

Matrix chuckled. "Classic!"

Macro shook his head sharply and grabbed the door, straining to pull it open.

"Buzzwole, hold the door," he said. "We're goin' in!"

It was oddly quiet. Even the sounds of battle outside were greatly muffled once the door was shut. The dim lighting created long shadows ahead of them, chilling Macro to the core. Anchor waited for them at the base of the stairs, nursing his shoulder.

"Rats," said Macro. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," said Anchor. "I can fight."

Buzzwole tooted sadly and held out a paw. Anchor took it and gave it a shake.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "You didn't know it would slam shut on my tail!"

Macro glanced back up the stairs. Where was DL? He desperately hoped she was okay, and hopefully just held up aiding her team.

Macro moves past Anchor towards the next door barring their way. Matrix hovered beside it, running his computer over the lock panel.

"We're in." He pushed on the door and it swung away from them. "After you."

Macro slipped past the ribombee, mechanical paw ready at his side to defend himself. The room beyond seeped purple light into the stairwell. The walls were filled with eyes that lit up red as they entered. Purple fire clung to the surface. The room looked like a tornado had hit it. Tables and desks were upturned, and metal objects lined the floor, reflecting the purple light. A computer lay at an angle, propped against an upturned desk. Its screen flickered, displaying a corrupted error message.

Matrix's arms slumped at his sides. "Well, looks like I've got my work cut out for me."

No sooner were the words out of his mouth, the flames intensified. Purple flamethrowers erupted from the walls, driving the pokemon back into the stairwell.

"How do we get past that?!" Matrix squeaked.

"We don't!" Anchor barked. "At least, that's what Distortion wants us to think. I guess the fight starts here?"

N0ize let out a triumphant roar and leapt over their heads. His fist lit up with flames and he brought them crashing down against the wall. Purple fire washed over his body, but he barely flinched. The eyes on the wall grimaced from his attack, temporarily shutting down their flames. He moved on, striking another section of the wall. Then another. The flames cut out wherever he hit. But as he reached the computer, the first set of eyes gathered themselves and spewed out their attack, cutting Macro and the rest of his team off from the room.

"It's the eyes," he said. "But there's too many. How do we attack them all at once?"

The xurkitree babbled and skittered into the room. Its body lit up with electricity and light pulsed from its body with the rhythm of a heartbeat. Then it flashed. Macro yelped, covering his eyes. A roar split the room, making the very walls tremble. Dazzling spots danced across Macro's vision. He blinked them away, bringing the xurkitree and the room back into focus. The purple fire had gone, and with it, all the eyes.

N0ize laughed raucously from the other side of the room. "Nice!"

"Excellent!" Matrix buzzed past them. "I'll get to work on this computer. Switch, if you would?"

The talonflame skittered past them to join Matrix's side.

"We'll move on," said Macro. "Join us when you're ready. I'll leave the xurkitree with you, in case those eyes come back."

The xurkitree babbled to itself as it moseyed around the room.

Macro followed the path to the next door. A deep sense of dread flooded him. It was all too familiar. The last time he'd taken this path, everything had gone horribly wrong. He looked up at his allies.

"I've no idea what to expect beyond this door," he said. "Brace yourselves."

Scrambling claws drew his eye back to the stairs and he felt his heart lurch. DL stumbled into the room, her fur scorched in places. The three kartana soared around her, swishing their blades in their unusual language. She stopped beside Macro and doubled over with her paws on her knees, panting to catch her breath.

"DL…" Macro raised a paw to her. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she gasped. "I'm just… glad I'm not too late…" She stood up and smoothed out her fur as best she could. "Rave said you wanted me."

Macro lowered his paw and diverted his gaze to the door. "Right now, I kinda want everyone…"

The lead kartana clanged its arms together twice, drawing Macro's gaze. Buzzwole stood beside it and flexed.

N0ize chuckled and thumped his chest twice then placed an arm across Buzzwole's shoulders. "They're right. You've got all of us. And the way I see it, so long as the rest of our allies are outside fightin', Distortion's attention is divided, givin' us more of a chance."

Macro gave a stiff nod and reached for the handle. "Well… here goes nothin'."

He pushed the door open and they stumbled into the room. Macro blinked at the immaculate walls. It looked every bit like the entrance hall to Socket's mansion. The very place they'd fought her. Not a hint of damage in sight. The only blemish was the blood stain on the tiled floor. The memory of it twisted his gut and he battled the urge to back into the basement and flee for his life. The small glint from his Z-Crystal settled his stomach and he pushed himself into the hall.

A long desk sat across it, the only anomaly in the room. A long, gold name plate perched on it, sporting the words 'Mayor BackDoor'. The hoopa android leant back on a seat with his arms folded behind his head. His eyes were closed as he pretended to snore. Beside the name plate sat Tweak. The little chingling slurped at an over-sized mug of tea. He looked up as Macro's team entered and swiped a paw across his mouth, scattering tea droplets.

"Mayor BackDoor is on break," he said. "If you have any complaints, you'll have to come back later. Or… I could always take a message. But I'm kinda enjoying my tea right now and don't wish to be disturbed."

He slurped loudly, tipping the huge cup back as far as it would go. It shrouded him from view. Once he'd finished, he dropped it and reached for a pen.

"Done!" He chimed. "What's the message? Water quality? Air quality? Plight of the water dwellers? Not enough land for fruit trees?" He looked up and grinned. "War?"

"No, no, no!" BackDoor sat up and threw his arms in the air. "You're do-do-doing it all wrong! We rehearsed this!"

Tweak waved his pen and shrugged. "I was going for 'sinister'!"

BackDoor swiped the chingling from the table. Tweaks internal bell jingled as he rolled away across the floor, scattering his pen and pad in the process. The hoopa twisted his head back to Macro and his lip curled in a sneer.

"Given he made a meh-meh-mess of things, I guess it's down to me." BackDoor's voice distorted and he rose into the air. "Distortion can't see you right now. Allow me to show you the exit."

BackDoor removed a ring from his horn and tossed it behind Macro and his crew. The mawile leapt away from it, feeling the tug as the gravity tried to suck him in. The kartana whizzed over his head, making a beeline for BackDoor. Their blades sliced at his metal hide and he screeched, zipping back from them. Another ring appeared in his paw and he lobbed it towards the kartana. They split apart, giving the gateway wide berth.

With no lasers, Macro had to get close to BackDoor. But it wasn't going to be easy. Both he and Anchor were in a similar situation. DL leapt between them, firing out streaks of electricity to short the android's circuits. He deflected them with one of his rings and tossed it into the fray. Between three gravity fields, Macro's limbs grew sluggish. He fought against the new gateway and threw himself at BackDoor. The lead kartana leapt in from the other side, sticking its blades into BackDoor's shoulder. He wailed, his voice breaking and sputtering with static. Macro brought his horn up and socked the android in the chin. His head snapped back and he whizzed away from Macro to land amongst Anchor and N0ize.

The incineroar brought his flaming fist down onto BackDoor's head. The shell forming his skull cracked, revealing the circuits inside. BackDoor brought up his paws and grabbed the incineroar. Electricity coursed through his arms and engulfed N0izes body. His fur stood on end and he fell back, spasming and sparking. BackDoor whipped himself free of Anchor, firing another jolt of electricity for good measure.

"You can't win this," said BackDoor. "You're just mortals!"

The final 's' dragged out into a 'z' and he raised his paws, grabbing a ring from either horn. He clashed them together, and several gateways appeared around the room. They vanished and reappeared randomly, causing the pokemon to leap from one spot to the next. BackDoor floated amongst them, using them as a shield to keep the pokemon and Ultra Beasts at bay.

BackDoor growled as he watched them desperately avoid the gateways.

"You're nothing but pests!" he crackled. "Annoying little pests! Why do you so desperately want to ruin my plans? I thought you wanted Socket out of the way? Well guess what! She's gone! I got rid of her, and you ungrateful little worms are trying to get rid of me, now, too?!" He clapped his paws. "Tweak!"

The chingling teleported next to him. "Yep?"

"Teleport each one of them to a ring," said BackDoor. "Make sure it sucks them in."

Macro's eyes widened and fixed on the chingling. No… they couldn't fight that. He looked over at N0ize and Anchor. Both of them knew dark type moves, like he did. Buzzwole had bug buzz at his disposal. But DL? The kartana?

"Kartana? DL?" Macro called out. "Pick a buddy! Make sure Tweak can't get to you!"

DL was too far away for Macro to grab. She locked onto N0ize while the kartana zipped over to Macro's side. A flash of purple appeared by Anchor. He brought up his fist and struck Tweak, sending him careening over to Macro. He brought up his horn and smacked the chingling like a tennis ball. Tweak let out an ear splitting scream as he soared across the hall to land at the entrance of one of BackDoor's gateways.

"Useless creature!" BackDoor hissed.

He lifted his arms and the rings vanished. Gravity returned to normal and Macro resisted the urge to fall to his bottom.

"Fine. Have it your way." BackDoor growled. "I need him."

Tweak looked up from his spot on the floor and a broad smile spread across his face. "Really?"

"Yes," said BackDoor. "Help doesn't-t-t come cheap."

Tweak ignored the back-handed insult and cheered, clapping his stubby paws. "What else can I do?"

While BackDoor's attention drifted to Tweak, DL crawled away from N0ize. The hoopa sneered at the chingling and pointed a mitten-paw at the door.

"Go and sto-o-op that ribombee!" He clapped his paws together to urge Tweak on. "I want him and that human in here. And that Ultra Beast! If they're gonna mess with my plan, they're all gonna die together!" He swivelled back to Macro and his group. "I'll pull each and every one of you to pie-pieces just like I did with Zero D-D-Day!" His voice cut off with static as electricity flooded his body.

BackDoor's limbs spasmed and jerked in an unnatural fashion and he slumped to the floor. Sparks bounced from the crack in his face and flooded from his back, dancing over the tiles before they vanished into the floor.

Macro stood over him, his mechanical paw clasped into a fist. He deeply hoped it was over, but deep down he knew it wasn't. They still had Distortion to contend with.

"Way to go, DL," he said.

The pachirisu stood up and dusted herself down, but her eye went to the window.

BackDoor let out a distorted groan and pushed himself up. His head lolled and wobbled, and one of his eyes whirled back into its socket.

"You… jerks…" he crackled. "You think… you've won…?" A raucous laugh. Distorted. It cut off as sharply as it had started and he fixed his lone eye on Macro. "Don't make me laugh."

The window exploded inward, glass flying across the room and snagging fur and flesh. DL launched herself at Macro, knocking him onto his back. She screamed and blood splattered Macro's face. He opened his eyes, fixing them on DL. Blood trickled over her shoulder and she clenched her jaw. The culprit lay beside him and he kicked the shard of glass away. Fiery purple tendrils filled the room, the heat from the flames burning into his horn. At his feet, Annie pushed herself up. Her clothes were riddled with holes and burns, and through them her flesh had been burnt raw. But she stood up and reached for the skuntank beside her. The flames retreated back, revealing most of Macro's team. Celesteela lay at an odd angle, her bamboo head and one of her cannons being the only parts of her body in the hall.

BackDoor rose into the air, sparks flying from his body.

"If you want a fight…" His voice was deep, and seemed to come from the very walls. "Then I'll give you a fight. One you'll soon regret!"

The purple flames flooded from the walls and filled BackDoor's body. He shrieked a mechanical scream as his body twisted and cracked,

stretching out further than it was designed to go.

As the flames subsided, BackDoor drifted in the middle of the room, his form warped wildly out of shape. Macro's jaw went slack. He recognized it as Hoopa Unbound, except the ring in his gut turned his body into a donut. It shimmered with its own ultraviolet light.

"This world is no longer yours!" Distortion spoke through BackDoor. "It is mine! In it, you are merely vermin!"

Widget scrambled to his feet from beside Tracer's dazed form. The eevee spat out bloody spittle and crouched.

"Vermin, eh?" He chuckled.

BackDoor turned his head towards him, but before he could retort, Widget leapt. His body began to glow and his four paws became a blur as he raced through the air. He covered the short distance in a flash, striking the hoopa in the side. More cracks exploded across his body and he shrieked, bringing two of his paws around to smack the eevee just as the light left his body.

Widget rolled back across the room, landing against the stairs with his bottom in the air.

"Urgh…" He coughed, expelling more blood. "Lucky shot…"

"Does anyone else want to try and take me?" BackDoor hissed. "Bring it on!"

Before anyone even had the chance to answer, one of BackDoor's disembodied hands leapt forward and grabbed hold of a nihilego. It tinkled furiously, fighting back. Its tentacles wrapped around BackDoor's limb, trying to take control of him.

Macro shook himself and leapt away from DL, bringing up his horn to strike BackDoor in the rear. Instead, the android span around and socked Macro with the nihilego. He went flying back in a tangle of

tentacles. The nihilego worked its way around him, cushioning his fall with its gelatinous body.

The entire room leapt into an uproar. Ultra Beast and pokemon alike threw themselves at BackDoor. He swatted them aside with his six paws as if they were nothing, deflecting their attacks with his rings before tossing them across the room.

"Fight all you want!" he roared. "You don't stand a chance!"

Gateways appeared around the walls, dragging the fighters back. But they fought back, sending any long range attack in their arsenal at the hoopa. Gunk shot, thunder bolt, spirit shackle… any attack fired his way, he raised his body to swallow it in his void. Then it reappeared from one of the gateways to spear an unsuspecting pokemon.

Macro's heart sank. BackDoor was right. They didn't stand a chance.

…

Matrix busied himself with the computer, ironing out the final errors. Numbers rained down his pocket computer's screen as it analysed and corrected any and all issues on the ancient contraption.

Thuds and screams came from behind the closed door. Muffled shouts and yelps of distress. Switch cowered beside the xurkitree, eyes fixed on the door.

"Hurry," he urged Matrix. "They need our help!"

"I'm going as fast as I can," said Matrix. "Don't rush me. Do you want a corrupted brain or not?"

Switch tightened his beak and turned back to the door. Matrix was right. With his lack of combat knowledge, Switch wasn't much help. He needed his memories back if he was going to use his Z-Move.

The red eyes reappeared along the walls and the xurkitree rose up, letting another blinding flash fill the room. Matrix blinked spots from his eyes, remaining focused on his task.

"Thanks," he told the xurkitree.

It babbled a reply and settled back down beside the talonflame.

"And done!" Matrix unplugged his computer. "Now to search this thing's database."

His claws flew over the keyboard. Window after window brought up hosts of dubious files that likely contained a fountain of information. But there was no time to check over it all. He needed to find Switch's memories. Any documents the computer held could wait for later when events would need to be documented.

But Matrix couldn't deny with the information Yobi's computer likely held, books could be written about his and Socket's plans.

"Aha!" Matrix grinned as he spotted a promising file.

Download Database Mark2.

He opened the file, displaying an array of text similar to DL's memory disks.

"I think we've found it," he said.

Switch shuffled over with the xurkitree and eyed the screen.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "It's not going to… make me someone else, is it?"

"I can't lie to you, Switch," said Matrix. "Well… I can, but I won't. It probably will make you someone else. So I apologize in advance if I turn you into DL." He grabbed the end of the jack lead and looked up at Switch. "Now… sit."

Switch's beak hung open as he stressed over Matrix's words. Then he squatted down and let Matrix plug the jack into his skull.

"Will I feel anything?" Switch asked.

"DL never complained." Matrix's claws glided over the keyboard. "Incoming data dump!"

Switch's eyes went distant as the files downloaded into his brain. Matrix sat patiently, watching the percentage crawl across the screen as he idly twirled his antenna. Once it was done, the xurkitree babbled a jovial little tune.

"Yup! Done!" Matrix unplugged Switch and watched his eyes flutter open. "Feeling any better? Back to reality?"

Switch sat back and pressed the button on his watch, allowing his human form to take over. He ran his hands down his face and sighed.

"Well that was an experience," he said.

"You haven't really answered my question," said Matrix.

Switch looked over at Matrix and the xurkitree. Sounds of chaos worsened and he diverted his eyes to the door.

"Come on," he told his friends. "We've got a war to win."

He switched his form back to a talonflame and soared towards the door. His feathers coated with flames and he barged through, scattering molten plastic and heated metal. Then his body lit up with a white light. A loud screech split the air and his body surrounded with the form of a glowing, white bird. He crashed into BackDoor, knocking the distorted hoopa from the air. They crashed into the floor, shattering BackDoor's shell.

Pokemon scattered as sparks flew around the room. And in a flash, each and every gateway blinked out of existence.

Switch stood up, returning to his human form. He stared down at the remains of BackDoor, his crushed form barely recognizable.

BackDoor pushed himself back up, trembling as his body rose back into the air. Two glowing orbs fixed on Switch, and the android's mechanical voice stuttered as sparks flew from the cracks in his face.

"You wretched human! I'll make you pay for that!"

BackDoor lifted his six paws and roared. The void in his stomach swirled, dragging Switch and anyone else close enough across the floor towards him.

Switch covered his head with his arms and fought back, straining against the void's pull. Then BackDoor let out an ear piercing shriek. Electricity engulfed his body and the void stopped. All caught in its pull slumped to the ground, Switch performing a neat roll.

The electricity died out and BackDoor collapsed to the floor, smoke curling up off his wires. Standing behind him was Yobi, gasping for breath. Machinery covered his right shoulder and the entirety of his arm, ending in the pincers of the vikavolt android. Its legs held it in place, and curled over his clavicle.

The sparksurfer raichu caught his breath and spat on BackDoor's smoldering remains.

"That's for killing Socket, you wretched hunk of junk!" he hissed.

The room fell silent.

"Is… is it over?" Macro's voice was barely a whisper.

The pokemon and Ultra Beasts gathered around BackDoor's corpse. All eyes except Yobi's went to the window. Outside, it was still distorted.

The walls began to shake as a deep rumble filled the room, and hundreds of red eyes spread across the bricks.

"Fools," Distortion hissed. "You fools!"

Mist flooded from the eyes, coalescing in the middle of the hallway. Distortion's insectoid body filled the room, stuttering between its draconic form. He fixed his crimson eyes on the small army.

"No," he said slowly. "It's not over."

He opened his mouth wide and a distorted, screech-like roar sliced through the air. The world around them twisted and spun in a cacophony of ultraviolet light. Lightning flashed in the distance, showing after images of Socket's entrance hall.

Distortion's form warped as tattered wings appeared over his shoulders. Six legs appeared beneath his body and he leered down at them. Hundreds of red eyes flashed around the room, leaking purple dragon fire.

"The battle," said Distortion, "is just beginning."

…

Please R&R! =D

Chapter 79

A/N - Thanks for all reviews, faves and follows! =D Here's the second-to-last chapter! The chaos continues…

Chapter Seventy Nine

Macro stood staring up at the ghostly dragon, his mechanical paw clasped into a fist. Despite the huge advantage he had with numbers, he doubted it was going to be an easy fight. No sooner had the thought crossed his mind, Distortion's entire body turned a shadowy black and he vanished into the floor in a puddle of shadow.

Macro tried to follow him with his eyes, but he'd well and truly vanished. A searing pain shot through Macro's spine and he wailed, flying forward as Distortion reappeared behind him and struck him in the back.

A flash of electricity lit up the swirling dimension as DL retaliated with a discharge attack. It barely phased Distortion. He flapped his wings and went soaring over them, taking on his centipede form. His body curled and twisted as he aimed his head back in their direction. Purple dragon fire streamed from his mouth, searing those close enough to him. Annie's clothes lit on fire and she panicked, beating them with her hands. Web shoved her aside and took the brunt of the attack, grunting as flames licked at her fur.

Zip splashed in his bowl, drenching Annie with water to quench the flames.

"Thanks for that, little fish!"

Purple gas rose from Web's body, a fatal flaw in her strategy given all the fire. Macro frowned. What was she up to?

But she cracked one eye open and smirked. All the gas flew from her in a torrent, lighting up as it struck Distortion's fire. The resulting

explosion blew him back with a tremendous force, leaving Macro's team enough time to rally themselves.

"All right!" he barked. "Anyone with a Z-Move left in their arsenal, now's the time to use it!"

He lifted his paw, readying his attack, but a small paw shoved him backwards. Defrag leapt past him, paws glowing with freezing light. DL wasn't far behind.

"Zip!" DL barked. "Once Defrag's hit him with her Z-Move, you're up!"

"Roger!" Zip skittered away from Annie on his mechanical legs, tailing after the two nimble pokemon.

Defrag leapt high into the air, clasping both glowing paws together. She brought them both down towards Distortion's head. He looked up, eyes flashing as he noticed her. Swerving to the side, he dodged the lopunny's Z-Move. Ice blanketed the floor, deadly icicles spearing the air. One clipped Distortion's right front paw and he howled, retracting them to take on his insect form once more.

Zip rose up from his bowl, spitting out his water gun. It warped and twisted into a spinning vortex, engulfing Distortion in its whirlpool. Then DL expelled her discharge. She leapt into it, letting the electricity engulf her body. She zigged and zagged, striking Distortion from all angles. The gigavolt havoc infused the hydro vortex with electricity, amplifying both attacks.

She landed behind Distortion, panting for breath. The water fizzled out, and Distortion drifted from it, sparks dancing across the water droplets on his scales.

His red eyes narrowed and he locked them on Defrag and Zip.

"Very impressive," he spat. "Now it's my turn."

He landed back on his six legs and flapped his wings, whipping up a whirlwind. The pokemon and Ultra Beasts were blown back as the wind increased with intensity. Shadowy mist rose up with it, tearing at their fur, feather and flesh. The nihilego tinkled with pain and Celesteela let out a devastated wail. Macro clasped his paws over his ears, trying his best to brace himself to attack.

The wind petered out and Distortion rose onto his hind legs. The ground shook and eerie glowing spots appeared beneath their feet. Macro's eyes widened with horror.

"Move!" he bellowed.

He leapt to the side as the ground exploded beneath him. Soil and rocks hammered his feet and he grimaced as pain shot up his right leg. He landed beside Annie who stooped to drag him back up by his horn.

"Hang in there, Captain," she said.

Macro thanked her and hissed as he tried to put weight back on his wounded leg. Pins and needles shot up and down it. Dang ground type attacks. Along with fire, they were the bane of his existence. He glanced over at Web who wasn't in much better condition. She stood beside Trojan as she shook soil from her fur, then gave her mate a reassuring nod.

Distortion rose up again for another earth power. His wings whipped up another ominous wind, catching the flying debris in some kind of ghostly sandstorm. His mouth opened in a screeching roar.

"We can't get close enough!" DL lifted a paw to shield her eyes. "The wind keeps blowing us back, and if these ground attacks keep up…"

Macro's jaw went slack and he looked down at her. Of course. He grabbed her in his paws and shoved her towards Switch.

"Get her in the air!" Macro told him. "Anyone with wings, get those weak to ground type moves in the air!"

Waveform soared over his head to grab Web in his talons. He turned back to Macro, but the mawile waved him off.

"You two provide a distraction," he said. "Attack him from the air while I get close enough to strike him with a fairy attack."

"But you'll get trampled!" Waveform told him.

"Forget about me and grab Tracer!"

Waveform soared silently over his head while Macro tried to find the safest route forward. Something trembled beside his leg and he braced himself to dive out of the way of another earth power. His eyes met Cookies just before the ground lit up again. He grabbed the slurpuff and leapt, clasping him to his body as they rolled away. The entire ground shook, peppering the pokemon with tiny rocks. Macro opened his eyes again, finding himself against the swirling wall of distortion. He could see the mansion through it. The windows. Guzzlord fighting against the drifting rocks. Stakataka shattering those barricading its path on the ground. Wildcard Gamma in the distance, drawing ever closer.

Above him, the nihilego struggled against the ominous wind. Several of them had hold of their allies. The xurkitree dangled like damaged wires, sparking as they launched electricity at Distortion. It washed over him like water off a ducklett's back. Another had hold of Tracer as he fired his flamethrower and psychic attacks.

"I'm going to try a shattered psyche," he told the nihilego over the wind. "Get me closer, friend."

The nihilego tinkled in reply then slipped between its allies.

Cookie wriggled free of Macro's arms and pushed himself up. "Look at everyone…"

Macro looked away from Tracer, taking in everyone else as his eyes wandered over them. Panting. Sweating. Pushing themselves on. Everyone was exhausted, yet they were still fighting.

"I need to heal them," Cookie went on. "Please… cover my back, Captain."

Macro gave a curt nod and pushed himself to his feet. His eye went back to the mansion. His ship… it was definitely moving closer. He wasn't imagining it.

A sweet smell filled the air and he turned back to Cookie. The slurpuff's eyes were screwed shut and his tongue poked out of his mouth. The Z-Crystal around his right paw began to glow, infusing his aromatherapy. It spread out across the distortion, washing over their allies. Noses twitched and eyes flitted to the side, resting on Cookie for a moment, but all signs of fatigue washed away.

Cookie doubled over, his paws on his knees, and the sweet scent vanished. The nihilego above them tinkled in triumph and swooped across the sky with Matrix, Buzzwole and Pheramosa. A neon green bug buzz flew out ahead of them towards the dragon. Widget dashed past Macro with a 'whoo!', his tiny paws kicking up debris as he fought against the wind. Poipole swirled beside Web, firing gunk shot after gunk shot. Anchor roared and rushed forward, joining N0ize in a stampede towards Distortion. The incineroar's fists glowed with dark energy.

"This is gonna hurt!" N0ize bellowed.

Distortion's eyes went to N0ize and he screeched, flapping his wings. His body turned a ghostly black again and he vanished into the ground. Tracer's shattered psyche missed its mark, and the delphox grimaced, burying his head in his paws. Distortion rose up behind Macro, slapping the mawile with his tail. Macro rolled backwards with a grunt and landed at N0ize's feet. Anchor tugged him up by his scarf and Macro looked between them. N0ize's paws

still glowed with his Z-Power, but his eyes weren't on Distortion anymore.

The dragon opened his mouth wide, purple flames licking at his teeth. But it flew from the side of his jaws as the nose of Wildcard Gamma broke through the distortion field and struck the dragon side on. He landed in a crumpled heap in front of it, and slid along the ground as the ship slowed to a halt. The swirling energy surrounding them flashed away, returning them all to Socket's mansion.

Distortion pushed himself back to his feet, shaking his head to clear the fog.

"What on earth?" he wheezed.

Macro and his crew stared up at the ship aghast. Axle and Sparky waved to them from the window then vanished as they scurried to the hatch.

Distortion shook out his wings and fixed his eyes on his targets. He began to whip up another ominous wind, screeching with rage.

"You think you can stop me with a cheap trick?!" he roared. "This ship is nothing but a hunk of metal! And like this mansion, I will turn it into part of me! I'll make you regret every moment of this! Every moment of your pathetic lives!"

His body turned to shadow, but it flickered back as a nihilego wrapped its tentacles around his neck. Another fastened itself to his shoulders. He bucked and swung around, dislodging the symbionts.

"You can't control me, vermin!" he screeched. "This world is mine!"

The nihilego rushed him again, joined by the xurkitree. Kartana soared over his head, nicking his scales with their blades. He roared, causing the walls to tremble, and ghostly tendrils snaked up from the ground to grab at the Ultra Beasts.

Axle scampered around the distracted dragon, tailed by Sparky and the porygon-z. The Zero Day model appeared stable, its eyes rotating left and right as it took in its surroundings. He joined Macro's side and cleared his throat.

"I've got it finished," he said. "I can have it find a world licketty-split and we can send this dragon away from System, along with this mansion if we have to."

Zero Day chirruped and swung its legs back and forth. Its head span in a dizzying fashion that Macro couldn't look at for too long.

"Well find an empty one," said Macro. "I don't want to inflict this thing on someone else's world, or the past for that matter."

"Or the future," said Anchor. "We're headin' that way, and I don't know about you, but I ain't willin' to put up with this guy's nonsense again."

Yobi staggered from the shadows, buckling slightly under the vikavolt's weight. He stared at Zero Day, his mouth curling into a sneer.

"Who brought that thing here?" he spat.

"I did." Axle turned to face him. "You asked us to find you one."

"Well I want it destroyed," said Yobi. "Those things… all of them! They've caused me too much trouble."

"No." Macro cut in front of Zero Day. "We need this. It can send Distortion out of System."

"But it can't bring her back, can it?" Yobi flashed a canine. "It can't restore System!"

"No, but it can give us a chance at surviving!" Macro retorted. "Back off and let us try, all right?"

Yobi lifted the vikavolt and aimed it at Macro. Sparks danced along the coil that ran up his arm between the pincers. A black paw fell on top of it and yanked it aside. Yobi looked up into N0ize's sneering face and let out a pathetic 'eep!'

"I've got enough experience dealin' with railguns," said N0ize calmly. "I suggest you aim it elsewhere, rodent."

He shoved the vikavolt away from him, knocking Yobi off balance. Searing dragon fire narrowly missed his tail and he whipped it back, curling it around his body.

"If you're gonna wave it around," N0ize went on, "then aim it at the rampagin' dragon!"

One of the nihilego landed in a crumpled heap between them, tinkling weakly. A xurkitree joined it, followed by a kartana. The small bladed creature arced away from them towards the ceiling in a bid to avoid spearing its allies. It scraped its arms together in frustration and leapt back towards Distortion, only to be buffeted away like a tennis ball by one of his tendrils. Its blades sliced through it, severing its tip, before the kartana found itself sticking out of the wall behind Macro. The brick spun around to reveal one of the many eyes and Distortion howled with pain.

Macro stared at the wounded eye for a moment, then looked back at Distortion, bucking and howling as he tried to dislodge the nihilego. The pokemon around him lashed out with every move in their arsenal. Acid rained down from the ceiling, unfazing the symbionts while the xurkitree ran for cover to attack from a safer distance. Web's Z-Move had been activated. Poipole circled over her, firing gunk shots at the dragon's face.

"Like this building, I'll turn it into a part of me…" Macro muttered.

Anchor clenched his fists and looked down at him. "What's that, Cap'n?"

"This building is part of Distortion," said Macro. "That kartana hurt him when it struck it."

The kartana bobbed beside his head, listening intently.

"Wildcard Gamma and Celesteela have both taken a chunk out of the walls," Macro went on. "When the ship crashed, that strange world we were in vanished. So we should also attack the building. If you can't reach Distortion, attack the building!"

Macro leapt backwards to strike the exposed bricks with an iron head. Eyes locked onto him as he approached it, spewing dragon fire. It washed over Macro harmlessly. He brought up his horn and smacked the bricks, shattering them into rubble.

Distortion howled again, jerking to the side. Two of the remaining three nihilego soared across the room to land beside Celesteela's dazed body. The huge Ultra Beast slowly pushed herself up, sending rubble raining down around her. Distortion hissed at her and kicked off the remaining nihilego. Its gelatinous body bounced across the floor, striking Trojan and knocking him off his feet.

Macro readied himself for another attack on the walls. The flames intensified, taking on a deep purple glow. They seared across his fur, burning it away to expose his flesh. He wailed and leapt backwards away from them, stumbling into Anchor's tail.

The granbull steadied his captain then threw a sucker punch at the wall. Flames washed over him, burning his pink fur to a charcoal grey, but he ignored them, focusing all his attention on the attack. The bricks exploded, creating a gaping hole in the wall.

Distortion's shadowy form rose up behind Anchor. Four sets of claws leaked an eerie, shadowy glow and he brought them down on Anchor's back. Anchor howled and staggered forward. Blood ran down his back and he crumpled to the floor.

"Anchor!"

Macro leapt over his friend, bringing an iron head up into Distortion's jaws. The dragon's head snapped back and he teetered on his two back legs. Then he vanished into the floor again.

Macro stared at the point he'd vanished, his fur on end. He was going to rise up behind him again. Not this time. Macro trotted forwards towards the shattered window and Wildcard Gamma's huge nose. Black shadow pooled beneath his feet. It exploded into the dragon's form and shadowy claws struck him in the chest. He careened backwards, briefly closing his eyes. But he saw Distortion vanish back into the ground once more. It trailed behind him like a dart, ready to attack.

…

Annie watched as Macro flew backwards from Wildcard Gamma. The little emolga cowered beside the giant wishiwashi with Zero Day and Sparky. She was almost certain they were planning something. But she couldn't very well watch Macro being tossed back and forth in the dragon's solo game of volleyball. Web and Zip's long range attacks fell short as the dragon vanished and reappeared too quickly and too unexpectedly to aim. Trojan and Waveform raced back and forth to avoid the purple flames in their desperate bid to attack the walls, like Macro had said.

But she couldn't even do that. All she could do was dive out of the way whenever the flames decided to target her. Which was almost never. As if Distortion didn't perceive her as a threat.

She clenched her fist. Useless. She was useless in this human form.

The brown Z-Crystal about her wrist sparkled and her eyes went to it. It hadn't done that before. Not outside being used for her Z-Power, however. Had she imagined it?

No. It sparkled again. More brightly this time. She stared at it, mouth slightly open. That sparkle grew with intensity and a warm feeling

spread up her arm. She began to shrink down as feathers exploded across her body. She lifted her wings and let out a triumphant laugh.

"I'm back, baby!"

Huge rocks rose up before her as she summoned her ancient power. The Rockium-Z infused it, merging the rocks together into one gigantic continent. She threw her wings forwards and the rock surged towards Macro. He struck it, bouncing away from it towards Annie. Distortion appeared from the ground beneath it and his red eyes widened as the continental crush smashed down upon his head, sending him back into the floor. He grunted, the sound coming from the walls as each red eye flinched and blinked out of existence.

Annie stared at the rock for a moment, then cheered. She stooped to drag Macro to his feet and he dusted down his scarf.

"Thanks," he said. "That was getting a bit annoying."

…

Macro stared at the huge rock in disbelief. The glowing eyes flitted across the walls as Distortion tried to gather himself. Macro clenched his fists and looked up at each of his allies. Exhausted. Beaten. Sore.

But it wasn't over. They needed to be ready.

The problem was, any plan needed to be voiced. The pokemon around him weren't telepathic, and couldn't communicate to one another's minds like Rave or Poipole. He glanced over at the blacephalon, doubled over beside Wildcard Gamma as he tried to catch his breath. The wall around him was shattered, evidence of his battle with it. It had been struck over and over by his exploding head. The result left him with a cranium the size of a gum ball, slowly increasing in size as he gathered his strength.

Oh how Macro wished he could somehow get his plan to him so he could broadcast it to everyone except Distortion.

A white tentacle brushed his shoulder and he looked back at a nihilego. It softly placed its tentacle on his head and began to pulse with a white light.

Macro's eyes widened. Had it read his mind? Well… whether it had or not, he could at least try. He thought only of his plan. A desperate bid to defeat Distortion once he reappeared amongst them. To tell everyone as fast as he could so they could wail on the dragon before he gathered his full strength.

The nihilego released him and rushed to Rave's side. It placed its tentacles on his slowly growing head and he froze.

Maybe it had worked? Or maybe the nihilego just wanted to leech on everyone's strength to recover its own? Macro didn't feel any different, but regardless he hugged himself, bracing himself for the dragon's sudden angry reappearance. The entrance hall was silent save for everyone's gasping. They knew it wasn't over. The vanishing and reappearing eyes were enough to tell them that. Distortion was still here. The world outside was still warped.

Rave stood up to his full height, placing one paw on Wildcard Gamma's hull to steady himself. Then Macro heard his voice. Everyone froze to listen.

"Everyone, this isn't over," said Rave. "All those who still have Z-Moves, ready them. When Distortion reappears, strike. If you don't have Z-Moves left, you aren't useless. Attack any way you can. Ghost moves, dark moves, ice moves… use them on Distortion. Otherwise, destroy the mansion as quickly as you can-"

A purple tentacle wound up beneath Rave's feet, knocking him off balance. He quickly regained it with a little athletic hop. But the tentacle wasn't after him. It plunged deep into Wildcard Gamma's jaws and they opened and closed, snapping at the air. Distortion's

head appeared above the large rock as his ghostly form manifested, flickering between insect and dragon. His red eyes narrowed and he opened his mouth in an ear-splitting screech.

"He's taking over Wildcard Gamma!" Macro barked. "Kartana, the rest of the Ultra Beasts! Stop him! Everyone else, you know the drill!"

N0ize leapt in first, his fists seeping dark energy. Distortion spotted him and let out a low growl, lowering his body to vanish back into the ground.

"Oh no you don't!"

A flurry of sticky thread flew from the ceiling above him and Macro spotted Matrix launching string from the proboscis in his chest. The string wrapped around Distortion, plastering his wings to his back. He screeched and thrashed, his long body fighting back.

N0ize laughed and brought up his glowing fist. "Thanks for that, bug!"

His fist crashed down on Distortion's head and the air around them exploded with dark energy. It swirled with red and black, spinning Distortion around like a rag doll. He came crashing back down on the giant rock and shattered it on impact. Shrapnel went flying, peppering the pokemon and Ultra Beasts around it.

Waveform brought up his wing, shielding himself, Annie and Macro. Then he readied his arrow.

"Never ending nightmare," he said quietly, almost drowned out by the dragon's screeches. "Once I've fired, Macro, you run in. He'll never see you coming."

The arrow flew. It struck Distortion in the nose then vanished into the floor. Black, ghostly tendrils rose up around him, dragging his tangled body into the ground. Macro's Z-Crystal flashed pink and he leapt through them, dodging between the thrashing tentacles. His

body sparkled and he met Distortion's furious eyes. The dragon let out another loud screech, stinging Macro's ear drums. But he grit his teeth and powered through it. He brought up his horn and brought it crashing down on Distorion's head. Pink sparkles exploded around him like a firework display. The shadowy tendrils retreated and Distortion broke free, staggering back and shaking his head.

He looked down at Macro, gasping. "You… this isn't over!"

Distortion's wings flew out to the sides, discarding the remains of the sticky thread that had bound him. Purple tentacles exploded from the floor, groping at the pokemon and Wildcard Gamma. The kartana fought them off, slicing them, but they reproduced faster than they could destroy them. Electricity danced from the xurkitree's bodies, paralyzing the tendrils only briefly.

Celesteela let out a deathly wail and raised her cannon.

"Get down!" shouted Rave.

The cannon exploded in a torrent of flames. They engulfed Wildcard Gamma, melting its hull. The wires sparked and sputtered, then the entire ship erupted in an almighty blast of flames and shrapnel. Macro covered his head, feeling heat wash over him. Rocks peppered his body as the mansion rained down around them. He braced himself for death. But it never came.

He glanced up to find Celesteela and Omnom standing over him. The huge dragon gulped down the rocks as they rained down, protecting those below him with his gargantuan body. Just beyond them stood Stakataka, masking everyone else inside his heavy walls. They'd finally got through the rocky barrier.

Macro chuckled and pushed himself to his feet. "Bon appetite, pal."

The guzzlord roared and lunged forward, sinking his toothy tongues into the bricks and pulling the mansion apart faster than Cookie could demolish pancakes.

Distortion screeched, turning his tentacles onto the dragon. Celesteela fired off another flamethrower, burning back the tendrils. She wailed again.

"Everybody move!" Rave told them. "Otherwise you'll get caught in her attacks!"

Celesteela wasn't interested in fighting the dragon. Her efforts were aimed at the walls and the pesky tentacles. She swung her cannons about, shattering rubble and firing flame throwers and seed bombs. Distortion hissed, his body blinking in and out of existence.

"No!" he said. "This is my world! Mine!"

Macro dove for the nearest opening. The world outside was gradually returning to normal. The purple haze fading. The land returning to where it should be.

Axle tapped him on the shoulder and nodded to Zero Day. The porygon-z's shell was peppered with pits and scuffs, but it seemed otherwise okay.

"We're gonna open a gateway," said Axle. "You might wanna get everyone out of here. We don't want any accidents, do we?"

"I'll do it."

The two pokemon looked up to see Yobi leaning against the rubble. He panted heavily, struggling to keep the vikavolt weapon aloft.

"You?" Macro snorted. "Why should we trust you?"

"Because this is my fault," said Yobi. "I made BackDoor. I caused all this. I'm the reason Socket's dead. Sending Distortion back… it's sort of a redemption. To right my wrongs. To restore System. Please… Let me do it."

Macro stared at him for a moment, meeting his eyes. The pokemon staring back at him was clearly wounded, and not just physically.

Part of Macro understood. Years of pain, wanting to make things right… He nodded.

"What?" Axle stuttered. "After I-"

"Go with him," said Macro. "I think he's being honest… but it doesn't hurt to have a guard, now, does it?"

Yobi nodded and ushered Zero Day ahead of him. Axle glanced back at Macro and cracked a half smile.

"All right, Zero Day!" said Yobi. "Find somewhere uninhabitable!"

Zero Day's nose lit up and unleashed a beam. Its head craned back slowly, and Macro felt a soft warmth at his side. White fur, glowing with a warm sunlight. He glanced up at Solgaleo. The lion's paw rose up with Zero Day's head, then stopped. He pointed a claw, and the beam cut through reality. A spinning vortex unlike BackDoor's gateways hovered in the air. It flickered with electricity, and it spiraled away from them like a tunnel through reality.

Distortion's screeches intensified as the vortex pulled him in. His shadowy body flickered in and out of reality. He thrashed in the air, dragon fire seeping between his teeth. The vortex swallowed him up, and with a flick of Solgaleo's paw, it was gone.

Silence.

Macro looked back up at Solgaleo. The lion gave him a warm smile and nodded. Then he vanished. The purple haze faded away, returning Seed City to normal. Save the ruins that filled it.

…

The final chapter will arrive this coming weekend, all being well! Please R&R! =D

Chapter 80

A/N - And here you have it. The grand finale. I hope you enjoy, and thank you for sticking with this story for this long! I won't keep you up here for long. I have more to say in my closing notes.

Thanks so much to all reviews, faves and follows! =D

Chapter Eighty

Everyone sat nursing wounds. Macro huddled between DL and Anchor as Cookie rummaged through his bag for healing berries. Web tended to Time Archeops' collective injuries, despite Waveform's gripes at her own. Widget was the one playing doctor for his own team, nattering away loudly as he worked. The Ultra Beasts sported the worst injuries of everyone, but Rave wasn't sure what good System's berries would do. Regardless, he'd taken some after Cookie's insistence, which the nihilego and xurkitree puzzled over.

The air in Seed City had returned to normal, but none of them had wanted to stay in it. They'd left once everyone had gathered themselves together, spreading out over the faux grass that surrounded it. Macro gazed across at the city. Ruined. A far cry to its former glory. But yet there was hope.

His eyes fell on Yobi, sitting far away from them with Axle with his back against a tree stump. The emolga had insisted on keeping the raichu company, much to his complaints. Zero Day twirled its head back and forth, seemingly oblivious to the conversations going on around it. The vikavolt weapon lay discarded at Yobi's side and he flexed his fist while munching on a sitrus berry. Despite what had happened to System, he had certainly helped them get rid of Distortion.

Macro pushed himself to his feet.

"Where are you goin'?" Anchor asked.

"I need to speak to Yobi," Macro explained. "I'll be back, don't worry."

The granbull thrust an oran berry into Macro's paws. "Well, take that with you. Either you eat it, or give it to him. Looks like he might need it."

Macro took it and turned to head towards the raichu.

DL stood and trotted after him. "Wait. I'm coming too."

He paused to look over his shoulder. "You sure? I mean… well, he really… you know…"

"I don't care," said DL. Then she shrugged and rubbed the back of her head. "Well… I do care. But he helped us, and I need to put this grudge aside and move on."

Macro took a deep breath and stared down at the oran berry. "That's what I'm doin'. Hopefully he'll listen."

The pair approached Yobi, drawing his eye. He clutched his aching arm and narrowed his eyes.

"What do you two want?" he growled.

"Peace." Macro offered him the oran berry.

The raichu leered at it and shuffled backwards against his perch. His eyes snapped back to Macro and he flashed a canine.

"After all the pain you've put me through?" Yobi spat. "You want peace?"

Macro shrugged. "As much as it might have seemed a good idea at the time to you, I think we both know your plan was flawed."

"It wasn't flawed at all!" Yobi snapped. "You just got in the way!"

"That doesn't matter," said Macro. "BackDoor could have dragged Distortion into all this without my meddling. Who's to say he wouldn't have killed Socket regardless?"

Yobi grimaced and lowered his face in one paw. "The threats were there. She refused to have a kill switch installed." He jerked his head back up and snarled. "But that's not the point! You took Download Database-"

He pointed a claw at DL who slapped it aside.

"I am not, and was not ever a computer!" she snapped.

Macro placed a paw on her shoulder and she retreated into herself, hugging her arms about her torso.

Yobi kept one leering eye on DL as he returned to his arm. Axle caught his attention and shook his head.

"I can't say I agree with your actions, turning this poor lass into a computer," said the emolga. "I mean, what good would that serve?"

"It was a perfect undercover plan."

Yobi caught the leers of the pokemon around him. Even Zero Day managed to look unimpressed.

The raichu sighed and waved a paw. "But I agree. Socket's idea to turn Loop into a computer was nuts. I wasn't all for it at first, but she got to me. Okay? Like she manages to get to everyone!" He paused and buried his head in his paws. "'Managed'. Argh, I still can't believe she's gone."

DL wrung her paws together and glanced away from him, towards the ruins. "Neither can I."

Yobi looked back up at her and his expression softened. "I guess she did raise you."

"Yes, but she was full of lies." DL took a steadying breath and turned back to him. "But… I suppose you were her friend."

Yobi shrugged and fidgeted his claws together. "I had known her for years. There's a lot she'd tell me that she'd never breathe to anyone else." He paused and looked at each of them in turn. "S'pose there's no harm in telling you now. Might make you see her ideas differently."

Macro exchanged glances with DL. He took a deep breath and shifted his weight to one leg.

"Okay," he said. "Enlighten me. Other than trying to find a new world for her elites, what was the main motive behind her plan?"

"That was kinda it," said Yobi. "But… the world she was looking for? She wanted to find a world with humans."

"To turn them into computers?" DL asked. "Like me?"

"Not just that." Yobi scratched between his ears. "She didn't talk about it much, okay, but her family were in the circle. The one that believe they're descended from humans. I was in it too, but I kinda wanted to break away. I met Socket and we both had our own ideas. Our own wants. We wanted to meet these humans. Myself for a pure scientific reason. Hers was just curiosity. She wasn't convinced they were real, but her experiences in System were less than desirable. She lost family to the toxic air, and the ruffians really shook her. All the news about crime, space pirates causing trouble… after a while she was scared stiff of going out. She kept looking back at the times when humans came into System. The changes they made. Getting lost in stories pokemon brush off as fiction. It's all long forgotten about now, reduced to myth status. Who knows what's true and what isn't? But the fact they came to System at all is true, and I think Switch and Annie have proved that to us.

"I, however, wasn't interested in the 'fairy tales'. I wanted to find out what makes them tick. How different are they to us? All that stuff."

"So you wanted to dissect them." Macro grit his teeth together, biting back the urge to lay into the raichu.

Yobi waved him off with his stronger paw. "Water under the bridge. I ain't gonna do it. I can go into this… scientific rampage where the moral line is blurred. I don't know much about humans, but I know enough now to know we're similar. They're sentient, we're sentient. Killing one to chop them up would be immoral."

"Kind of like turning a pokemon into a computer?" said DL.

Macro caught her eye and she shook her head, turning her face away from the raichu. She pawed at her ear and Macro saw her bite her lip.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Maybe I shouldn't talk for a while."

Yobi watched her for a moment then closed his eyes. "I'm sorry I did that to you."

She jolted and slowly turned back to him.

"She made me," he went on. "Socket was pretty scary when she was mad. I had to do it. I told her destroying your memory disks would be murder. If I hadn't put my foot down, you wouldn't even have got them back."

DL shuffled her feet and diverted her gaze back to the city. "Well… thank you."

Macro rolled his eyes and tilted his head back to the sky. "So Socket thought she was human?"

"Part human," said Yobi. "All the evidence was there. She kept it under her hat."

"Whoa!" The voice hadn't come from any of them.

They all turned to spot Tweak standing with his mouth agape, staring at them.

"She was part human?" He hopped up and down jingling noisily. "That's huge!"

"Where on earth did you get off to?" DL snapped.

"Duh!" Tweak fixed his beady eyes on hers. "I ran! I wasn't sticking around after that guy went berserk! BackDoor went down and that was it. I was off!" He hopped over Yobi's knees to land between him and the vikavolt. "Is this another one? He weren't half bad, that BackDoor, I liked him."

"What?" Yobi grabbed the chingling by his hairs and held him at eye level. "He killed Socket!"

Tweak lifted his paws and laughed. "I was kidding! Can you take a joke? That guy was scare-ry!"

Yobi dropped the tiny pokemon and sighed, leaning back against the tree stump.

"Well," he said. "I guess after this… I need to find a new lab."

Macro narrowed his eyes in thought. DL shifted beside him and she slowly approached the raichu.

"You could… help rebuild System?" she said. "You have the mechanical know-how. You could build something that could really help. Make this the 'perfect world' she was looking for? Free of poison, where everyone gets along."

Yobi met her eyes and his mouth turned into a frown. "That ideal world doesn't exist."

"But you were lookin' for it," said Macro.

Yobi shrugged. "I was looking for it for her. Just taking the elites - no criminals, no dark types, no ghost types, no bugs… it was all for her." He wound his paws together and turned away from them. "I just want to be alone right now, okay?"

Macro nodded and placed the berry beside him. He took DL's paw and steered her away, back to their friends.

…

It took about a month to restore System's major cities. The Ultra Beasts, along with Switch, insisted on staying to help rebuild, the nihilego in particular aiding with the restoration of the more toxic infused areas. While they worked, gateways were opened to Deep Sea, allowing the poisonous air to be sucked away, high up enough to avoid catching any unsuspecting pokemon.

Slowly but surely, System began to recover. Pokemon rallied across the region to work together. Those in System Sky came down to help their brethren on System Ground, and vice versa.

Macro eyed the restored Meta City and leant back against the remains of a mechanical tree.

"Don't think we'll be needin' these anymore, eh?" Anchor nudged a filter leaf with his toe then stood beside him, his paws tucked behind his back.

Macro nodded stiffly and licked his lips. "I just can't believe I'm looking at this place, knowing Socket isn't living in it… yet it still scares me."

"Memories take a while to adjust." Anchor shifted and looked down at him. "Give it time."

N0ize strolled from the city and tossed a huge lump of mortar into a skip. He beat his paws together, laughing joyously.

"Think that's the last of it!" he said.

The xurkitree manning the skip chattered in its peculiar language and rushed away, its body sparking as it gained momentum. Just outside the outskirts, Onmon waited to dispose of the rubble. The guzzlord puzzled Macro. All that rubble went somewhere, but it never left any waste whatsoever. It was the cleanest cleanup crew System had ever seen. He couldn't help but wonder what its world must be like.

N0ize spotted Macro and Anchor and grinned broadly as he joined them.

"Lookin' good, eh?" he said as he admired the city. "If I were seein' it for the first time, I'd never suspect it had been hit with a disaster."

Macro followed his gaze. Switch circled the city with a pair of nihilego, checking for anything that may have been missed.

"Aye," said Macro. "They've helped a lot. But pretty soon we'll be saying goodbye to our new friends."

"Argh, don't make me cry," said N0ize.

The two space pirates looked up at him and he shrugged.

"I'm serious," said N0ize. "I get teary eyed when it comes to goodbyes."

"Tell me about it." Macro tapped N0ize on the elbow and turned from Meta City. "I'm gonna check on how they're gettin' on in Spool City. See ya later."

"Hang on, I'm comin' too." N0ize fell in step beside Macro. "Tracer said he were redecoratin' his office. I've got a question for him."

Macro cocked an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Aye." N0ize tucked his huge paws behind his head.

That was it. No elaboration. Macro exchanged glances with Anchor and they chatted quietly amongst themselves as they strolled through the streets of the outskirts.

No one would recognise it. The entire place was immaculate. The underground plumbing had been repaired, allowing waste to flow away unseen rather than overflowing from manholes and drains. The air was clean, barely a trace left of the yellow smog. One of Zero Day's gateways hovered above it, cleaning up what remained.

The tattered, outdated adverts had been eaten away during Omnom's rampage, and any that had remained had been eagerly devoured. The walls, if not new, had been scrubbed to within an inch of their lives. It was barely distinguishable from Meta City.

Tracer's little office stood where it always had. Unlike previously, it now sported a sign above the door. 'Tracer and Widget's Detective Agency.' It was originally only going to read 'Tracer's Detective Agency' but Widget had been very vocal on the matter.

N0ize moved on ahead of Macro and rapped on the door. Then he opened it, bellowing his greeting as he slipped inside.

Macro and Anchor had to trot to catch up before it swung closed behind them. Anchor looked around the office and let out a long whistle.

"This looks posh!" he said.

The walls were a clean white. Where the air filter had previously occupied now sat an air conditioner, cooling down the room with a refreshing breeze. Despite the air conditioning, however, the thick smell of cigar smoke filled the office, trailing up from Tracer's muzzle. Defrag sat at her desk with her feet up while the other two detectives busied themselves rearranging their desks. N0ize stood and watched them, leaning against the wall beside the door.

"Here!" Tracer bundled a heap of papers into the incineroar's arms.

A bewildered expression crossed N0ize's face and he opened his mouth to question the delphox.

"I think Omnom could dispose of these," Tracer said without prompting.

"This, too!" Widget tossed a broken pen onto the pile. "Let's make use of this recycling facility while we have it, eh?"

"Don't you think we aught to start our own?" Macro asked.

"That takes time," said Tracer.

"Exactly," said Macro. "The Ultra Beasts are set to head home in two days!"

"Wave City is already on the ball," said Anchor. "I think you aught to set aside some stuff and carry it down there if you need to. While the outskirts get their act together? Be a shame to let it fall into the same state it was in a few weeks ago, eh?"

Tracer nodded and retrieved the papers from N0ize. "A good point. I'll get on that."

"No, I'll do it." Defrag leant towards her computer. "As self appointed governor of the outskirts, it's my job."

Widget snorted and wrinkled his nose. "I think the self appointed governor should slack off less."

Defrag's pen bounced off the eevee's head and he laughed, returning to his tidying.

"Anyway, I've got a question for you, fuzz," said N0ize.

"Oh?" Tracer raised an eyebrow.

"Aye. Quite a biggun, actually." N0ize scratched his head and shuffled his feet. "You see, Pulse City's gone and… well, so's my

ship. Cyph3r's still in custody. But even so, like… Socket's gone and now I've got no one to hide from. So…"

"Spit it out, man," said Widget.

N0ize cleared his throat and tried to look Tracer in the eye. "Do you need an extra paw here, or…?"

Tracer's cigar fell from his mouth. "You want to join my agency?"

"Our agency," said Widget, not taking his eyes off the incineroar. "So you wanna stop bein' a space pirate?"

N0ize shrugged his large shoulders. "Worked for you, didn't it?"

A huge grin spread across the eevee's face. "Well I say welcome aboard! But it's really up to Tracer."

The delphox's mouth opened and closed, and he stooped to retrieve his cigar.

"Well…" he said, popping the cigar back between his teeth. "I think we can give it a go?"

Macro caught Anchor's eye and nodded to the door. The granbull took his message and followed him out, but not without giving N0ize a friendly, congratulatory thump to the shoulder. The incineroar grinned at them both, and Macro smiled fondly before closing the door behind them.

"Well, that were an eye opener," said Anchor. "I mean… our ship's scrap now. What are we gonna do with ourselves?"

Macro glanced down the street, spotting a xurkitree slinking along it. DL followed after it, carrying a crate of cleaning supplies. She shouted something that Macro couldn't hear to Matrix as he buzzed on ahead of them. Cookie followed after her, no longer showing any anxiety towards being outside. He clutched a first aid kit tightly in his paws, trailing DL as she vanished into another street.

"Oh, I think I know what I'm going to do," said Macro. "I'm thinkin' of headin' back to Cyan City."

Anchor raised an eyebrow at him. He'd picked up the anxiety in Macro's voice, he could tell by the concern in his eyes.

"You don't think she'll go with you, do you?" Anchor asked.

Macro took a breath through clenched teeth and pushed himself from the wall to head back to Meta City.

"She's from Botnet," he said. "It's her home. I won't be surprised if she wants to go back. But me? I can't live there. To have those memories every day? Besides, they won't want me around up there."

"You even asked her?" Anchor asked.

"Not yet," said Macro. "I dread her answer."

…

As System began to recover, its inhabitants taking up residence in their new homes, it was time to send everybody back home.

Yobi approached the two humans, his expression unreadable. He looked up at Switch, then over at Annie leaning against Zip's water bowl.

"Priorities," he said. "I'll be lookin' to send you back before the Ultra Beasts. They're still helping to iron things out, so… I'll be goin' away for a little while to find your homes."

"Really?" Switch asked. "How long a while?"

"No idea. It might take me a while to find your exact time-lines," he said. "You should brace yourselves for a long stay in System."

"Well, I can cut that in half for you then," said Annie. "'Cos I ain't goin' back."

"What?" The question came from almost every pokemon around her, even Switch.

"You heard me," she said. "I ain't goin' back to that time-line to get locked back up in a cell. I'm free here. I've made friends - no - a family. And I want to stay with my family."

Silence washed over them as they took in Annie's words.

Web rose up on her hind legs and placed her paws on the girl's shoulders. "You know you're very welcome here, dear. But Switch said you eventually go back to your human world."

"Yeah, and it's exactly the same," she said. "Another lab. More books. Forget it."

Waveform brushed Web off Annie and shook his head. "Let her stay if she wishes."

Macro's jaw went slack. "But won't it mess up the time-line?"

Switch sighed and rubbed his hand through his hair. "It's already pretty messed up. I mean, I've got to go back with a socket in my skull."

Macro grimaced and wound his paws in his scarf. How much would this impact System's future now? Would it change his own?

Yobi stared up at Switch and folded his arms. "I doubt it'd change much. If anything, it might just throw you into an alternate time-line."

Macro's jaw dropped and Switch gasped.

"Are you serious?" Macro squeaked.

"Really? Alternate?" Switch shook his head. "What about my own future? I don't get to live it?"

"Yes," said Yobi. "Given you haven't lived it yet, nothing has changed for you."

Switch let his arms fall to his sides and relaxed. "I guess you have a point. But how am I to explain this computer in my head?"

"Tell them the truth," said Yobi. "Unless you want to keep it under your hat?"

"So it won't cause any problems?" Macro asked.

"Not to us, no. Or to Switch." Yobi marched past him with Zero Day in tow. "I'll be back in a few days when I've found your time-line, Switch. Having two of you exist in one at the same time? Now that would be a problem."

Switch blanched. "You mean… like some kind of time anomaly? We'd freeze or turn to stone or something?"

Yobi looked back at him over his shoulder. His muzzle creased in bewilderment. "No. What kind of TV shows do you watch? It would just be a problem. There'd be two of you."

He shook his head and marched away.

A few days later, Yobi called Macro on his computer. The time-line had been found. They had to make their way to Seed City.

The sparksurfer raichu stood outside a deli with a small audience of curious pokemon. Macro and his friends stood amongst them, waiting for the raichu to open the way to Switch's world.

Macro looked up at the human. He stood with his arms folded, leaning back against the wall of a mini market.

"You know," he said to Macro, "the last time I watched a gateway be opened… I'd made a solid decision to stay in System."

Macro raised an eyebrow. "You're not sayin' you want to stay here, are you?"

"Because we've already got Annie," said Matrix.

Switch shook his head. "Of course not. I've got my own little family back in my own time-line. I want to watch my nephew grow up."

Macro nodded and turned back to the raichu. "I get it."

"Don't get me wrong. It's nothing personal."

Macro snapped his head back to face him, ready to tell him he didn't take it as anything personal, but Switch grinned and gave him a playful wink.

Macro laughed and shook his head. "It's good to have you back, Switch."

"So you keep saying." The human stretched and kicked himself back from the wall. "I guess I'd better brace myself for a rough ride home, huh?"

"All right, I've found it!" Yobi turned back to them as Zero Day cut open the gateway. "Switch, if you would?"

Switch smiled down at the former Wildcard. "It's been great to meet all of you. I'll be sure to tell my friends all about how their great-times-fifty grandson helped save System."

Macro blinked back a tear and returned his smile. "Have a safe journey, pal."

DL rushed forward and reached up to grab Switch's hand. A smile spread across her face and she released him quickly and brushed at her ear.

"Please… take care," she said. "And thank you… for everything."

Switch stooped to place a paw on her head then turned, waving at his friends as he approached the gateway.

Macro and his friends watched until it closed, taking Switch back to his own world.

…

The time had finally come for the Ultra Beasts.

Yobi stood ahead of the crowd with Zero Day and Axle at his side. Axle's xurkitree companion Sparky had barely left his side, and the xurkitree muttered to himself as Yobi called Zero Day to open a gateway to the Ultra Beast's world.

"Like I said," Yobi told the crowd, "there's only one gateway here. It will get you back to Ultra Metropolis. That's Poipole's home. But I'm led to believe you're all from the same world, so you'll find your way back to your homes and your trainers."

The Ultra Beasts chirruped and cheered their replies, except for Rave. He strolled from the crowd towards Yobi and placed a paw on his shoulder. The raichu flinched but didn't shrug him off. He looked up at the blacephalon and nodded, stepping aside to allow him to speak.

Rave turned to the crowd and made an elegant bow.

"I can't thank you all enough for your hospitality," he said. "I made a lot of friends in Binary City, and I lost a lot of them during Distortion's attack. But we've all banded together to form a force to be reckoned with. We've learned we're not that different. And I think I speak for us all when I apologise for the sheer havoc we have wrecked on System."

Macro glanced up at the kartana drifting beside him. Somewhere behind them, both Celesteela and Omnom spoke up. The guzzlord's

growl was almost drowned by Celesteela's eerie wail, but the pokemon understood their agreement to Rave's comment clearly.

"I am glad we were able to help you rebuild your world," said Rave, turning a pale blue. "And I have personally enjoyed my stay. But there is one question I ask of you. Back in my world, Ultra Beasts often long outlive their trainers. I miss my trainer dearly and I look forward to seeing him again. But once he's gone, I fear I'll be alone. I would surely love to come back and visit System in the future. So… would it be okay if we took Zero Day with us? That way we have the option to come back. If it's okay with you?"

The pokemon fell silent, staring at the blacephalon. Macro's mouth opened and closed as he tried to take it all in.

"I think it's a fine idea," said DL.

Macro snapped his head around to look at her. She beamed from ear to ear, clasping her paws together.

A few more pokemon in the audience spoke up, adding their agreements to DL's. A few shifted awkwardly, casting nervous glances back to Celesteela, Omnom and Stakataka. But no one declined Rave's request.

"I can reassure you," Rave continued, "that events here will be documented. We'll try our utmost to put in place a screening service. Visits here will be only allowed to those who promise to show respect."

"Then I can't decline it." Jumper strolled forward from the audience and took Rave's paw in both of his. "It's been a delight to meet you all. You've done a lot to help System. You chased off Distortion. You've repaired damage. And you've helped to clean up System to allow future pokemon to grow up without that wretched toxic air."

Rave bowed again. "Thank you, dear Jumper. You are a top notch fellow."

The frogadier chuckled and retrieved his paw. "Then lets send you home! You've got trainers and family alike who miss you."

Rave raised a paw and tutted. "Trainers are family, Jumper."

"My mistake." Jumper smiled and stood back, turning to address the Ultra Beasts. "Have a safe journey. All of you."

Yobi indicated to Zero Day, and a beam shot from its nose. One of BackDoor's signature gateways cut through reality. Its swirling ultra violet light flickered beyond it. The grass bent towards the void as its gravity slowly tugged at those closest to it.

Macro instinctively took a step back and clutched DL's paw. He watched as Rave stepped into the void first, pausing to wave at his friends.

Then, one by one, the Ultra Beasts flooded towards it. The kartana turned to Macro and rubbed their blades together, creating a slow grating sound.

Macro smiled up at them. "Take care, guys."

They turned and zipped ahead of the line, twisting as they sped through the gateway.

Web unfurled her tail, letting Poipole rise into the air. A warm smile spread across her face and she blinked back tears.

"Goodbye, little one," she said. "You take care now."

"Yeah!" Zip flailed his fins as he strained to rise to the surface. "You'll tell your trainer all about us, right?"

"Of course," said Poipole. "And I hope you manage to save the water dwellers."

"I think we already have." Trojan placed a paw on the rim of Zip's bowl. "System's changed a lot in such a short time. It's kinda jarrin'."

"But it's good, right?" Poipole asked.

"It's very good, dear," said Web. "Give our best to your trainer. Tell him we think he's raised an amazing little Ultra Beast."

"Oh, I will." Poipole looked at each of them in turn, letting his eyes linger on Annie. "I might… ask him if he doesn't mind calling me Sticky every now and then."

"Stop it." Annie rubbed a hand over her eyes. "You're makin' me all misty-eyed."

Poipole chuckled and turned back to Web. "Thank you for letting me live in your tail. I'll miss it."

Then he turned and zipped for the gateway, joining the nihilego as they drifted above the xurkitree. Buzzwole paused by the gateway with Pheramosa and flexed his muscles, before ducking inside. Pheramosa flicked her shell and smiled, then leapt daintily through. The larger Ultra Beasts closed up the rear. Stakataka and Omnom insisted Celesteela go first. She stood covered from head to foot in tiny versions of herself, brought back from Pulse City by Worm. The small space pirate sobbed beside Macro, waving a stubby paw.

"I'm gonna miss them," he said. "I got pretty attached to the little guys."

As soon as Omnom was through, Yobi ushered Zero Day to close up the gateway. Then his eye went to Axle.

Sparky stood beside him, rooted to the spot by his cable-like limbs. Axle nudged him, mouthing something Macro couldn't hear.

Then the xurkitree shook its head, cowering towards the floor.

Axle turned to Yobi and sighed. "I don't think he's gonna go."

Yobi flapped his arms as he looked between the xurkitree and the gateway. The gravity pull was beginning to intensify, and it tugged at

his tail. Finally, he let out a flustered sigh and placed a paw on Zero Day.

The porygon-z vanished beyond the gateway. After a few long minutes, it closed up, leaving no sign it had ever been there.

Sparky rose to his full height and chattered, sending out thin sparks of electricity. Then he wrapped his wiry limbs around Axle, pulling the emolga into a hug.

"Argh!" Axle flailed in his grip. "Oh, put me down, you goof!" The emolga laughed, playfully shocking the xurkitree.

"Well," said Jumper. "Welcome to our first official Ultra Beast inhabitant."

…

The outskirts were oddly quiet. Annie strolled along the streets with her friends, heading towards Gear Village. She clutched Zip's bowl in her hands, silently moving ahead of Waveform and the rest of the former Time Archeops. Web snuffled into her paws, but Annie chose to block it out.

All her attention was on reaching their destination. Not far now. She could see the green at the end of the road. The sign that read 'You are now leaving Spool City. Welcome to Gear Village.'

Green grass brushed against the hem of her trousers, and she followed the narrow path along to the trees. She heard the river before she saw it, gurgling away beyond the fruit trees. She came to a stop at its bank and looked up at the canopy across from it.

"Here you go, little fish," she said. "I told you I'd get you back home."

She reached into the bowl and pulled out the tiny scattering of ashes, then tossed them into the water.

"Swim free, little guy," she said. "The struggle of the water dwellers is over now."

Waveform placed a wing around her shoulders. "We did all we could."

"No," said Annie, struggling to fake a positive air. "We did more than we could."

She turned away from the river, still clutching the goldfish bowl. Web stood in Trojan's embrace, but when she caught Annie's eye, she nodded.

"We definitely did," she said. "We gave the little guy a second chance. Come on. Let's head home."

"Nah." Annie looked past her at the greenery. "I think I'm gonna sit here for a while."

She moved over to an oran tree and sat back against it, looking out at the river and the small orchard beyond it. Waveform strolled over to her with Web and Trojan, and they joined her side. Sitting silently as they let Annie escape into her thoughts.

…

Cyan City's glass dome lay partially open, letting the orchards soak up the midday sun. Macro strolled out of his apartment, checking the time on the town hall clock in the distance. It wasn't long until he had to meet Jumper, but he wanted to catch DL first. She'd been quiet about her plans, and he still hadn't breached his question to her yet. His heart hammered in his chest at the sheer thought. He'd put it off for weeks. He really wanted to catch her before she made any decisions about giving up her appartment and returning to Botnet City, now it had been repaired. Shortly after Macro had visited it, it had fallen victim to Omnom's hungry rampage and it had taken about a month to get it back up in the air let alone rebuild all the tower blocks.

As he rounded the street towards the square, DL almost crashed into him. He placed his paws on her shoulders to steady her and laughed.

"What's the rush?" he asked.

"I was coming to get you." She pawed at her ear and diverted her gaze. "You have that appointment with Jumper, and… well… I was curious, so…"

"You decided to invite yourself along?" He shrugged and placed a paw on her back, steering her along beside him. "Well… funnily enough, I was coming to get you anyway."

"Oh?" She looked up at him and met his eyes.

"Yeah." A metallic taste filled Macro's mouth and he clutched a paw to his chest, trying to hide his anxiety. "Now Botnet City's been restored… I wondered if…"

"I'm not going back there."

Her answer caught him off guard and he snapped his head around to look at her. "But I thought… it's your home?"

She shook her head and pawed at her ear. "It was Loop's home. I found my own home when we arrived at Cyan City. And you're staying here, too, right?"

Macro looked away from her, his mouth turning dry. "Well… yeah…"

"Don't you want me to stay?"

"No! I mean, of course I do!" He turned back to her, violet eyes wide and frantic. "I, erm… I was kinda worried you'd want to go back and well… You know me and Botnet."

She chuckled and shook her head. "Don't worry. Even if I did want to go back, I wouldn't want to leave you."

His jaw dropped and he froze to stare at her. "DL, erm…"

She inclined her head on one side, prompting him to continue.

"You know I've had issues with forming attachments in the past." He wound his paws together. "Well, you've kinda changed that, and…" He paused to clear his throat and looked her in the eyes. "I was kinda hoping… you might live here with me. As my wife." He paused, watching the shock spread across her face. His heart leapt into his mouth and he waved his paws. "If you want to!"

She rushed towards him and threw her arms around his neck, burying her face into his shoulder. "Of course I want to!"

Macro let out a sigh of relief and held her close. "Thank you. Man, I don't think I've ever been so nervous."

She laughed and pulled back from him to plant a kiss on his lips. He returned it, refusing to let her go even when she tried to pull away.

"Come on," she said when he caught her again. "You'll be late!"

"Drat." He released her and took her paw, leading her towards the square. "I'd love to know what he wants. Why he can't tell me on the phone, I'll never know."

When he reached the town hall, Anchor, Matrix and Cookie were waiting beside Heatsink. Matrix didn't look up as Macro approached, sat comfortably on Anchor's shoulder as he messed with his computer.

Macro's face lit up when he saw the empoleon. "Great to see you finally out of hospital! But back at work already?"

"Oh, I'm not at work," said HeatSink. "But I couldn't miss this."

Macro frowned and looked at each of them. "Miss what?"

Anchor shrugged, almost knocking Matrix off his shoulder.

HeatSink ushered them into the town hall. Jumper's office door was open, and they spotted him going through his desk drawers. Boxes lay on the floor, filled with various office equipment.

Macro slowed down, casting his eyes over the small room.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

Jumper looked up and beamed. "You're a little early! I was hoping to have this sorted before you got here."

"You look like you're off," said Anchor. "You givin' up your job?"

"Not quite." Jumper straightened and rubbed the back of his head. "System is in need of a new mayor. The situation of the water dwellers is somewhat shaky, and the transition to a vegetarian diet isn't settling with some of the more carnivorous pokemon. They wanted a water type to take over, and offered me the position yesterday. So I took it. How much different can it be, really? An entire city… the whole of System?" He rubbed the back of his head and sighed. "Needless to say, it's a daunting task that is both terrifying and exciting at the same time. I wanted to keep it quiet until I'd sorted things out in Cyan City."

Macro glanced around the office and spread his paws. "That's great, Gov, I'm happy for you… but who's takin' over from you?"

"That's why I called you here." Jumper leant against his desk and smiled. "I was hoping you would take the job, Macro."

Macro's jaw almost hit the floor. "Me?! But I'm a former space pirate! I'm a criminal! You can't honestly-"

Jumper waved a paw to cut him off. "I know full well who you are, Macro, and I don't think of 'criminal' as an honest description. You saved Cyan City. You and your friends. You helped put an end to Socket's plan. Saved System. If anything, you're more suited to Mayor status than I am. But when I broached that decision, Meta

City wouldn't take it." Jumper leant forward to place a paw on Macro's shoulder. "So I'm leaving Cyan City in your paws. If you'll take the job?"

Macro stuttered as he tried to find the right words. Him? Governor of a city? The Z-Crystal in his mechanical paw caught his eye and he glanced down at it. It wasn't sparkling, but he was certain he saw Solgaleo's eyes smiling at him.

Anchor stooped towards his ear. "Say yes!"

"No pressure, or anything," Matrix added.

Macro snorted, then laughed and shook his head. "All right, Gov… I mean, Mayor. I'll take the job. I'm actually rather humbled you thought to ask me."

Jumper straightened and beamed down at him. "I wasn't going for 'humbling', Macro. You were just the perfect fit for the job, in my eyes. And HeatSink will be your assistant, so you definitely won't be alone in this."

"HeatSink?" Macro's muzzle creased. "But what about the force? Who's takin' over there?"

"Torrent," said HeatSink. "Floppy wanted the job, but I don't think he's quite cut out for it yet. Besides, I had to step down. I don't think I'd have the stamina now." He absently rubbed at his scarred chest.

"Well…" Macro took a steadying breath. "This is the second biggest thing that's happened to me today, and it ain't even lunch time…"

Everyone fell silent, and a blush spread over DL's face.

"We're, uhm…" A silly smile spread across her muzzle. "We're getting married."

Jumper's eyes widened as he looked between them. "Really?"

Macro nodded, trying to hide his own blush. "That's right. Old Macro's settlin' down."

"You serious?" Anchor clapped his huge paws together. "Oh boy, I'm happier than a baby ducklett who found a puddle!"

"What?!" Cookie gasped. "This is amazing! Oh man, I'm gonna head back home and make a start on designing the biggest, bestest most delicious cake you've ever tasted!" He jiggled with glee and scurried from the office.

Matrix chuckled from the granbull's shoulder and pawed frantically at his computer. "I'm gonna find the most embarrassing music I can, and you're gonna have your first dance to it."

Macro grimaced and playfully swiped for the ribombee's computer. Matrix zipped into the air to rest on the air conditioner.

"So!" said Jumper, drawing order back to the room. "Big news day, huh? Well, Macro, I'll leave Cyan City in your paws. If you need to recruit anyone else…" His eyes drifted to Anchor and Matrix. "Well, I'll leave that up to you."

Macro glanced up at his friends, and HeatSink placed a flipper on his shoulder.

"The police force might appreciate an extra set of paws or two?" he said. "Just suggesting."

"That's a fantastic suggestion." Macro grinned up at Anchor.

"They'll be well received," said HeatSink. "I mean… we still have the bug pokemon to deal with. Not to mention Lossy's missing twins."

Macro bit his tongue and glanced out of the window. Cyan City spread across from it, its berry orchards ripe for the picking. Things might have looked okay after System's tragedy, but it definitely was

only surface deep. Things were still bitter between the grass, fire and water types. How could he have forgotten the twins?

"Switch was looking into that case," Macro said. "So… I guess we'll be takin' over, eh?"

Anchor saluted and Matrix buzzed back down to his shoulder.

Jumper grabbed one of his boxes in one arm and smiled at each of them. "I'll be back to check in on you from time to time. This city will always be my home, and I trust I've left it with the best pokemon imaginable."

Macro nodded and took Jumper's free paw. "Definitely stay in touch, Jumper. And thank you for everything."

The frogadier nodded and shuffled from the room. "I have a ship waiting. Take care, Macro. All of you."

"I'll give you a paw with your boxes," said Anchor.

He grabbed the remaining one and followed Jumper out of the office.

"So…" DL shuffled her feet. "From space pirate to governor of a city…"

"Yup." Macro chuckled and glanced around at the office. "If my mother could see me now…"

He stared at the chair for a moment, before sinking down into it. It reclined back slightly, and he relaxed back into the seat. He tucked his paws behind his head and kicked his feet up onto the desk.

"Oh yes," he said. "I could definitely get used to this."

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A/N - I just want to thank everyone for their support on this story - those who've faved/followed/left feedback, and those

who've read quietly. Thanks so much for sticking with this to the end. I hope you enjoyed it! This may or may not be the last we see of Wildcard Gamma. Who knows? System just won't leave me alone for some reason.

Anyway, there is potentially a third story in System. You can find the details in my profile. However, it's been on hiatus while I work on The Mask Behind the Monster (a Sonic 'fic), and I might have another… cyberpunk Sonic 'fic idea that's dancing around in my head like a flamboyant goofball. Either way, if you're interested, keep an eye open! System: Outbound may well be a thing!

I post news and updates to my FFNet profile from time to time, but if you want more steady updates and fanart off me, I strongly advise you hit me up on Tumblr - Delirious Absol (AKA Del's Mad World)

Thanks again! And as always, please R&R! =D